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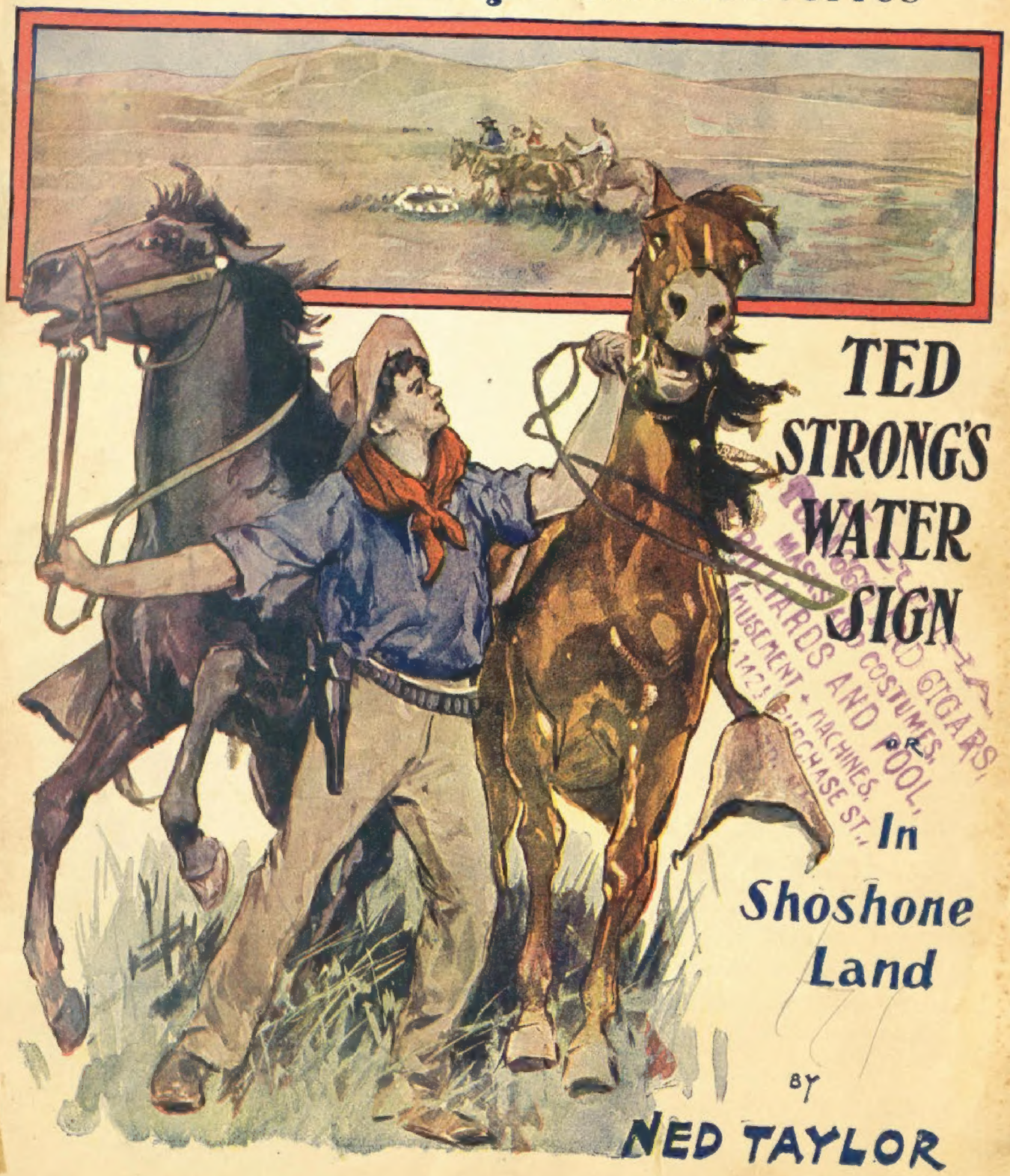
The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories



TED STRONG'S WATER SIGN

OR

In Shoshone Land

BY

NED TAYLOR

CIGARS, COSTUMES, AND POOL, MACHINES, PURCHASE ST.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

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Ted Strong's Water-Sign;

OR,

IN SHOSHONE LAND.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE END OF AN ILL-SPENT LIFE.

It was a sandy hollow in a dry, arid plain, covered with a sparse and scanty growth of sage brush and mesquite shrub.

Four boys were standing about a long, narrow excavation in the earth.

There is only one thing formed by the hand of man that takes the shape given to this hole in the ground. It is never to be mistaken, and everyone knows it when he sees it. It was a grave.

Near by were hobbled three horses and two burro mules, while alongside the grave was the dead form of a man. Ted Strong stood near this man's head and looked down into the still, dead face. Bud Morgan was standing near him. His face was pale and very thin and lined, his form was emaciated and his eyes were dull. He had just been through a terrible experience in the desert.

Beside Ted stood Ben Tremont and Kit Summers. They had been helping Ted to dig the grave, using their knives and their bare hands as tools to scrape out the dry, sandy earth. Now they were resting, sweating from every pore, their labors over.

"Well, Bud"—Ted turned and looked into the face of the cowboy—"that's the last of your old enemy, Jim

Speed. You've had a terrible experience with him here in the desert. It's a lucky thing we met that stray horse of yours. It was crazy from eating 'loco' weed, but it led us right to the place where you and Speed were lying together on the sand. Speed was dead, but you were alive and handcuffed to the dead body."

"It's a thing I never want to go through again," said Bud, slowly, "but I just had to run this feller down. He killed my brother way back in Abilene, and when he was arrested for it and put in the lock-up in Paco I thought it was all right. But then when I learned that he had escaped I made up my mind to follow him here. I didn't want you fellows to get mixed up in it, so I came alone an' left a note behind for you, to tell you where I had gone."

"I got the note," said Ted, "but I didn't intend to have you go on that chase alone."

"I rather think not," said Kit Summers, wiping the perspiration from his brow. "There would have been a scrap right then and there if anyone had suggested that the young rough riders leave one of their comrades to go alone after a desperado into a desert like this. We stick together, Bud. You can just bet your life on that!"

"You fellows are sure white through an' through," said Bud. "I might hev shot this feller down in the desert, fer I had ther drop on him, but I remembered that I had given my promise to Ted not to shoot him, but to take him prisoner. He died, though, of thirst. He was half crazy when I met him."

Ted laid his hand kindly on the shoulder of the cowboy.

"We all appreciate what you have gone through," he said. "I always knew that you would keep your word. And you mustn't suppose that the other boys were not anxious to come into the desert to look for you also. It was only the scarcity of water here and the knowledge that we would not be able to bring a big enough supply for all of us that prevented the whole body of the young rough riders from coming, too. Beanpole and Bob Martin were just crazy to come. We left them behind us in Boulder, from which we started."

Bud smiled.

"I know all the boys is square and white," he said, "and now my chase is over. The man who murdered my brother Tom is dead now, although he never was tried fer the murder. We oughter give him as good a Christian burial as we can in this unholy place."

"We'll have to bury him pretty deep," said Kit Summers, glancing around him with a shudder. "Look at those things. They are only waiting for us to leave so that they can swoop down upon the body."

He pointed as he spoke. On all sides of them fluttered great unclean birds, buzzards, the shadows of their slanting wings black on the ground beneath them. Here and there could be seen a raven, and farther off, sitting solemnly and watching, were two or three mean-looking coyotes, the thieves of the West.

The boys were in the Land of Little Rain, in the southernmost portion of the great American desert, south and west from the Panamint Mountains of California. They had gone there in search of Bud Morgan, who had been on the trail of the man who now lay dead, Jim Speed, who had killed his brother years before. Speed had hoped to cross the desert, through Death Valley, past some water springs of which he knew the existence, but Bud Morgan had caught him and taken him prisoner. Then the horse he rode had been eating "loco" weed and had gone crazy from the effects of it. It had dashed away, carrying with it the supply of water, and the two had been left alone to die of thirst. They would have died had not Ted Strong and his companions been led by the crazy horse to the spot where they lay.

None of the boys could repress a shudder as they looked at the great evil birds, swooping in the air

above them, or perched here and there on the sand a little distance off.

"We'll have to pile stones on the body after we bury it," said Bud; "that is the only way to keep the coyotes from digging it up."

Between them Ted Strong and Ben Tremont raised the body of the dead man and dropped it softly into the hole that had been hollowed out for its reception in the sandy ground.

Then all the boys removed their hats and stood with the sun beating on their heads about the open grave.

Ted repeated a few verses which he rememberd out of the burial service. He had heard it read many times over the graves of fallen comrades in Cuba and in the Philippines, but never, he thought, under such terrible and awe-inspiring circumstances as this.

When he had finished Ben Tremont threw in a few handfuls of sand, and the other boys followed his example. Presently the body was hidden from view, and then the boys labored for a long time piling upon it heavy stones which they picked up here and there on the barren soil so that it might not become the prey of the birds and beasts.

At length the grave was filled up and a heap of stones was piled above it to mark the spot. There was no way of placing an inscription above it, for there was not in that barren waste a piece of wood big enough to carve the name of the dead man upon it.

The boys worked in silence, and when they had completed their solemn task the sun was dropping down toward the horizon, a great ball of yellow fire, the wind was rising and sending whirling columns of dust into the air. Night was coming on over the Land of Little Rain.

"That's the end of Jim Speed," said Ted at length. "I'm sorry we couldn't give him a better burial."

"Many a better man has ended in the same way," said Kit. "I guess that Speed had few good acts to boast of during his life."

"It's the end of a misspent life," said Ben Tremont, solemnly, "and he was evidently planning to make a good haul when he ran away."

Bud stooped down and raised a belt from the ground. It had belonged to Speed when he was alive. It was lined with pockets, and the pockets were well filled with gold coin and with bills.

"Before he died," said Bud, "when him an' me was alone here in the desert, an' I expected to die, too, pretty soon, he seemed to come to his senses a bit. He had been ravin' sorter from the effects of ther thirst an' ther heat, but before death come ter him he was quiet an' stopped beggin' me ter shoot him an' put him out of his agony. He took his belt offen him an' give it to me. He told me that three hundred dollars in there belonged rightfully ter himself, an' asked me, if I ever escaped alive out o' here, ter send it ter his mother in ther East. The other money he said as how he had won at poker from the pore vacqueros who worked under him at the Las Palomas ranch. He asked me ef ever I got outen here to give it ter them. I didn't expect ter live much longer nor him, but he was dyin', an' though he did kill my brother all ther hard feelin' was over then. I promised him an' I'm goin' ter do it."

"That's right, Bud," said Ted; "and now we might as well treat the whole thing as past and done for. Our next move is to get supper, and then we must plan to get back out of the desert. We are on the edge of Death Valley, I think."

"Bud knows the country pretty well about here," said Kit.

"Pretty well," said Bud; "I don't know it as well as Speed did. Just as he was dyin' he tried ter tell me ther location of some springs on ahead. He said that they weren't so very fur away."

"Did he tell you?" asked Ben.

Bud shook his head.

"He was just a-goin' to tell me," said the cowboy, pushing back his long hair, "but jest then ther death rattle sounded in his throat. He didn't speak no more after that, but jest looked at me, pleadin' like, and plucked at his shirt. I opened it fer him. Ther was a cross inside. I held it up fer him an' he died lookin' at it."

"This is mournful talk," said Ben. "Let's get about getting something to eat. My, but it gets cool here at night! I can feel a cold wind coming up already, and a little while ago I was just burning up.'

Kit shivered.

"It does get cool," he said; "I suppose that out on some of the higher mesas it's cold enough to freeze by night and hot enough to roast by day."

"That's about the climate here," said Ted. "We've got blankets along, luckily, and we won't suffer from the cold."

"The only thing we're liable ter suffer from is thirst," said Bud; "it's a long way back, an' ther ain't so very much more water left on ther backs o' them there burros. You fellers used a whole lot of it up bringing me to."

"We'll track back to-night, if possible," said Ted. "You can ride one of the burros, Bud. So much water has been used already that we can load all we have on the back of one of the mules."

"We ought to lose no time about it, either," said Ben Tremont; "I heard as we left Boulder that a party of Shoshone Indians were dancing the scalp dance. They might cross back of us and cut us off."

Ben had been collecting fuel for a fire, and now a blaze was started over which the coffee pot was soon humming merrrily.

Supper, consisting of canned meat, canned beans and hard tack, was soon ready, and all the boys tackled it with a good, hearty appetite.

Ted was silent during the meal. Ben's remark about the Indians had called to his mind that he had seen Indian trails, and he was a litttle worried.

CHAPTER II.

THE WATER SIGN.

After suppper the boys went back to look at the water barrels, in which they had brought their drinking water for their trip into the Land of Little Rain. They had brought with them four barrels, which had been slung across the backs of two burro mules.

Ted tilted up one of the barrels.

There was a slight splash of water inside, but it was very slight. Ted's face grew grave, and he weighed and poised the end of the keg in his hand. It was so light that it seemed as if it could not contain any water at all.

"What's the matter, Ted?" asked Kit, seeing the expression on the face of his young leader.

"There's not much water in this barrel," said Ted; "I thought that it was about full. It's pretty near empty. There must be a leak in it somewhere."

Ben Tremont seized the barrel in his big hands and rolled it over.

"Humph!" he said at length; "one of the staves is sprung. That makes our water supply pretty short. There's scarcely enough to wet your tongue in this."

There was silence for a few moments, all the boys afraid to speak. They knew what it meant to be without water in the Land of Little Rain, and they knew that there was very little water in the other barrels.

Ted turned suddenly and spoke to Bud Morgan, sharply. His face had grown a shade paler in the moonlight and his brows were knitted.

"How far do you suppose we are from Boulder, where we started from?" he asked. "You know this country pretty well."

Bud ran his fingers through his yellow hair and scratched his head.

"I make it about a hundred and fifty miles," he said.

Ted said nothing. There was a terrible sinking at his heart. One hundred and fifty miles! That was the distance to Boulder, the nearest point at which there were any water springs, on the map. To go forward in the other direction meant to cross the terrible windless sink of Death Valley, to go a much farther distance. Ted's mind held a thousand pictures at that moment. He saw the animals falling over, parched with the thirst. He saw his dear friends listless and weary, sinking in the desert sands, dying a slow, agonizing death. He could not bear to think of such things. Such thoughts would unseat the sanest understanding. He turned to Bud again.

"We'll have to get on the move again, quick," he said; "there's only a half barrel of water left. I don't want to lose the horses or the burros. You say that Speed spoke of water not so far away."

Bud nodded his head. He was still weak and faint from the terrible experience he had gone through in his chase for Jim Speed.

"There's water somewhere not so far off," he said. "Speed tried to tell me, but as I was a-sayin', he died with the words on his lips. Jumpin' sandhills! We've got to find it! We've got to find it!"

"Did he give you indications of any kind as to the direction?" asked Ted.

"I dunno," said Bud; "ye see, I was kinder gone myself, alone with him in the desert. I don't seem to remember very well yet. I guess my mind began ter sorter leave me when I saw ther buzzards a-drawin' near ter feast on our bodies."

"Pull yourself together," said Ted. "Think, and think hard. You must have learned something from Speed."

Ted was speaking very sharply on purpose. He thought that in this way he might help Bud to collect his thoughts.

Bud stood silent, with a frown on his face, for a long time. The moon was rising over the desert and it showed the faces of the five boys, all pale and serious. Every eye was bent on Bud. At last the cowboy began to speak slowly and uncertainly.

"I dunno," he began. "It's kinder hard fer me ter recollect durin' thet time I was alone with Speed in ther sand, bound ter him with ther handcuffs. But it seems ter me thet he said somethin' about Indians—somethin' about ther Shoshone Indians hereabouts, an' somethin' about them knowin' where ther was water ter be found near hereabouts. I dunno—it's kinder hard ter remember—ther was—somethin'—somethin' he said about——"

Bud became silent, but, paying attention to a warning gesture from Ted Strong, no one else spoke. As for Ted himself, he seemed to be trying to help Bud remember with the force of his own will. His brown eyes were fixed on Bud's, his jaw was set hard, his brows were knitted and his whole face wore an expression of strain and intensity. After another long silence Bud went on again. It almost seemed to the others as if Ted had hypnotized him and he were speaking from a state of trance.

"I seem ter remember now," he said. "Speed tole me somethin'—somethin' about a sign—a sign made by ther Injuns—a water-sign, he called it—I dunno—he said as how I was to look fer a water-sign. Thet's all I kin remember, I guess."

Again he became silent. None of the boys spoke for a long time, but Bud could remember nothing more. Ted urged him to try and think, and Bud did his best, but he finally gave it up as a bad job.

"Well," said Ted, at length, "we have at least something to go by. We have the information that there's some sort of a sign to be looked for. We don't know

what sort of a sign it is, but we know enough now to be on the lookout."

"It might be any sort of sign," said Ben Tremont. "How do we know what to look for? We might march right past this sign, whatever it is, without ever knowing it was there."

"I guess not," said Ted; "this is a pretty flat, lonely sort of country, and anything out of the ordinary, even if it is only a mesquite bush that is a little bigger than the others about it, is sure to attract our attenion. If there's a sign of some kind, and we come anywhere near it, you may rest assured that we shall see it. We'll have our eyes open. When Speed spoke of a sign there is no doubt that he meant something that could be seen easily and which would attract notice when it was seen."

"That's all right," said Kit Summers; "but how are we to know in which direction to look for this water-sign? We have all the four points of the compass to turn to. We might march north, and the water and the water-sign might be due south from here—in fact, it might be in any direction, and we can't explore the country all about here for miles."

"I don't believe that we'll have to explore the country all about here for miles," said Ted; "if it came to that, we might attempt it, but that won't be necessary. At least, I don't believe that it will be necessary."

"Well, if you mean just to strike out in some given direction by guesswork, my idea is that we would be likely to take any direction but the right one."

"The odds would be greatly against our taking the right direction if we just guessed blindly, because there are a great many points to the compass, any of which we might head for, but there is only one right direction. But do you think that we will have to strike out by guesswork?"

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud; "I don't see anything else for it."

"It's the only way we can do, so far as I can see."

Kit scratched his head and looked puzzled.

"Have you any other suggestions to offer?" said Ted, turning to Ben Tremont.

"Search me," said Ben, with a light manner, but with a serious face. "I am up a tree, and I suppose that I might as well confess it."

"You seem to have something up your sleeve, Ted," said Kit Summers; "have you thought of something else?"

"I have thought of something else," said Ted; "but it's something that you fellows would doubtless have thought of if you had given yourselves a little more time. I've thought of a way to ascertain in just about the direction we ought to go.'

"You have!" exclaimed Kit. "It's more than I could think of if I took all the time in the world!"

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud; "I shore hope ye hev thought out somethin' good. I allers did hev a great respect fer yore head, Ted. Ever since thet first day we went out a-ridin' tergether an' ye made ther bullet carom against a rock like yer was playin' billiards with rifle balls, an' wounded ther feller as were behind ther rock—ever since thet time I allers thought ye hed about as level a head as any boy I ever kept tabs on."

"You fellows are only joshing," smiled Ted; "but about that water-sign, it's just this way. We know that Jim Speed was looking for it."

"Sure we do," said Bud Morgan; "so are we lookin' fer it. Thet don't help us much, I'm thinkin'."

"But it will help us," said Ted. "Speed knew where it was unquestionably, for he had evidently been here before and seen it."

"But Speed's dead and buried now," said Kit; "he can't ever tell us."

"Can't he, though?" said Ted. "Perhaps his footsteps can. All we have to do is to look for his trail and ascertain the direction he was taking when Bud over-

took him. Then all we have to do is to imagine ourselves Jim Speed."

"A pretty durned hard thing," said Bud.

"Imagine ourselves in his place, anyway," said Ted, "and follow along in the direction he would have taken had not Bud stopped him. We can easily find out how he was traveling from his trail, if there are any vestiges of it left, and I think that there are. All we have to do is to keep on traveling in the same direction. Then, if I'm not very much mistaken, I think that we'll come upon this water-sign unless we make some mistake. There's a bright moon now. It's cool, and we can see just as well as by daylight. All we have to do is to keep our eyes open for the water-sign. Saddle up, Kit and Ben. Bud and I will step back and look for Speed's old trail."

"It's our only chance," said Kit Summers.

"It's a wise scheme ter foller," said Bud Morgan. "Ted, ye shore hev a great head on yer shoulders."

"My head's all right, and so is yours," said Ted, with a merry laugh. "Come on, Bud, and we'll look for this trail, and never mind my head."

That laugh of Ted's, in the midst of the horrible circumstances in which they were placed, sounded so happy and light-hearted and good to the other boys that it cheered them up wonderfully. All of them had been pale-faced and gloomy, for they knew what it meant to be lost in Death Valley, but now they started to their tasks with ready alacrity that showed that Ted's words and, still more, his confident manner had a good effect on them.

It is this quality of inspiring confidence in those following that makes a leader of men. To do so, the leader must have confidence in himself, believe in himself thoroughly, and be possessed of a steady courage that is never shaken even in the most trying circumstances. When a man has these qualities in him he can inspire a whole regiment of men to deeds that they would not have been capable of without his influence, and can fill them with a steadiness and courage that can stand any shock. The leader, however, to be a really great leader, must be unselfish in his motives. He must have the welfare of his followers rather than his own welfare at heart. Such a man need fear nothing, for though he may fail in his undertakings, his life can never be a failure.

CHAPTER III.

THE SEARCH FOR THE WATER-SIGN.

While Kit Summers and Ben Tremont were engaged in saddling up the horses, arranging a saddle from Speed's dead horse on the back of one of the burro mules, and balancing two quarter-filled barrels of water upon the pack saddle of the other, Ted Strong and Bud Morgan were going back over the ground on foot, trying to find some vestige of the trail that had been taken by Jim Speed.

Of course, Bud Morgan, who had folllowed him, knew very well the general direction in which the dead man had traveled, but it was necessary for the success of Ted Strong's plan to get the direction down to a very nice point.

A deviation of one degree from the right course at the starting point would mean a change in the course of a very considerable distance after a day's march and might result in the boys' missing the water-sign altogether.

The ground gleamed white among dark tufts of sage and mesquite in the moonlight, and Bud and Ted, as they walked backward, scanned it with eager eyes.

"He must have come in this direction," said Bud, starting off south; "we'll come upon both his trail and mine, sooner or later."

"Here's the trail of a horse," called out Ted.

Bud went over and looked at it fixedly.

"My horse left that trail," he said. "I know, because he had cast the left hind shoe. I was follerin' straight fer ther smoke of a fire that Speed had lit, an' I may not hev took ther same trail as he had. But we'll find his marks pretty soon."

They started off again, walking slowly, several yards apart, so that between them they could examine a considerable stretch of ground as they walked.

Presently Bud waved his hand in the air.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed.

Ted ran over to his side. There was a strip of soft, spongy earth running for some little distance across the desert. It was in a slight hollow, or depression, and therefore sheltered somewhat from the wind. Plain and distinct in it could be discovered the tracks of a horse.

"Unless that was made by some of your party," said Bud, "it is the trail of Speed's horse. It shore isn't from mine, an' I guess we are about the only folks who hev been around these here diggins recently."

"It's not the trail of one of our horses," said Ted, "because Kit, and Ben and myself all come forward in a bunch, and other tracks would show beside it if it were ours. But I can tell pretty well if Speed's horse made it. Before I started I made a few measurements from its hoofs as it lies dead back there. I can tell in a minute."

Ted stooped down, drawing from his pocket a string, in which certain knots had been tied. For a few moments he labored over the prints of the horseshoes in the sand, trying them first this way and then that with the string, while Bud Morgan watched him in silence. At length he rose from his cramped position and stretched himself.

"Speed's horse made that," he said.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud, "yew struck et. Now all we have to do is ter face around an' keep on a-goin' the way Speed was a-goin'."

"A little more than that," said Ted. "If we started off that way without any artificial means of regulation of our direction we should soon be traveling in a big circle. We might hit the water-sign that way, but the chances are that we should not."

"How do we do then?" asked the puzzled cowboy. "I know that about travelin' in a big circle, fer I was lost in a woods oncet myself without any trails er blazes ter foller, an' it took me a gol-dinged long time, let me tell yer, before I got wise ter the fact that I was walkin' on my own trail over an' over ag'in. Then, in course I made a different play, an' begun ter watch trees an' things, an' presently I got clear."

"Let's walk back several hundred yards and get on the top of that roll there. We may be able to look back for a considerable distance and see the general direction that Speed's trail took. In this spot he may have deviated a little from his proper course because he found it easier riding here."

Back they went to the top of a slight hillock which commanded a view over a goodly stretch of the desert, moonlit country.

Speed's trail ran back clear and straight for a considerable distance, and it never swerved to the right or the left by an inch.

"That fellow knew where he was going," said Ted; "he likely had a compass with him, or was able to guide himself by the stars at night. His course seems to lie straight as a die, and I think we shall be all right if we start from it here. There are few undulations of any account in the country, and riding is about as easy in one place as another here, so that there is little likelihood that he would swing off the right direction."

"He was half crazy when I met him," said Bud, "but I reckon he knew this land here as well as any white man livin' an' he was a feller I know as could foller a trail in ther dark, drunk er sober."

"I guess he was taking the right direction," said

Ted. "With an old borderman such as he, following a proper course becomes habitual, more or less, and it is like walking or riding—it does not require an active effort of the will. So the chances are that, even if his mind was wandering, he was trailing along in the right direction, anyway."

The boys wheeled around now and started to walk slowly back.

Ted carried an old gun-metal watch in his pocket, and from the fob there hung a little pocket compass set in a piece of agate. The young rough rider had picked it up as a curio in the Philippines. He had little thought that it would ever be put to such serious and important use as at the present moment. It was little more than a toy, tiny and apparently useless, but still its little black needle pointed unwaveringly northward and that is all, really, that the finest mariner's compass ever made can do.

The moonlight was clear enough for Ted to see the needle as he held the compass in his hand and moved forward along the trail that had been left by Speed's dead horse.

Northward the needle of the compass pointed and northward ran the trail as though it had been laid out by a surveyor. Never the slightest deviation from a steady northward direction, never the slightest turn to left or right—the trail ran as straight and clear as though it were headed for the north star.

"That's the direction for us," said Ted, turning to Bud. "You know where the north star is."

Bud shook back his mane of hair and pointed toward it.

"There it is," he said, "up at the end of the dipper, up thar where ther great b'ar an' ther little b'ar is. I learnt that way back in Vermont, but ther stars never shone so bright back thar, an' yet at the same time they never seemed so fur away. I dunno how 'tis."

"The atmosphere is very dry and clear here," said Ted; "the dryest and clearest in the world. That's what makes them shine so bright. We want to follow that north star to-night."

"I've heerd how some feller says as how yer oughter hitch yer cayuse ter a star, thet's what we's a-goin' ter do as near as we kin, I guess."

"I don't believe the man that said that said 'cayuse,'" remarked Ted; "I think that he suggested hitching your 'wagon' to a star."

"But we ain't got no wagons," said Bud; "I guess mebbe as how thet feller would have said 'cayuse' ef he hed our case in mind."

"Maybe he would," said Ted, with a smile, "cayuse it will have to be for us, anyway. I wouldn't like the job of hauling a wagon through here, although some people have tried it before us."

"An' left ther bones an' ther remains of ther waggin by ther side o' ther trail," said Bud.

"Well, that's what we won't do," said Ted, cheerily. "Here we are, up to the others. They are all saddled up and ready to start."

Ted waved his hand and called out to Ben and Kit in a loud voice.

"Due north, boys, northward ho!"

Kit and Ben were in the saddle in an instant. Bud mounted to the back of the burro that was reserved for his use, and Ted vaulted upon the back of his own horse. Ted's enthusiasm seemed infectious. The boys looked at each other with bright, hopeful faces, the horses pranced and stamped in the cold, crisp air and even the little burros whinnied raucously.

"Now," said Ted, "we start. We must first divide our work. We have two things to do. One is to keep our course due north, with never the slightest deviation. The other is to scan every bit of the country for signs of any kind that may indicate the presence of water. Bud, here is an old plainsman. He has guided his course by the star across the prairie many a night."

"You bet I have!" said Bud.

"He'll have the job of laying out the course. He's the man at the helm in this expedition. Here, Bud, take the compass and don't waver from the north a mite in the course you set."

"Keno," said Bud, as he took the little compass from Ted's hand.

"The rest of us have our work chalked out," continued Ted; "it's simple, but it's got to use up every atom of our attention. It's to keep our eyes peeled and to see everything that it's posssible to see before we pass any given point. We are going to go along slowly and steadily, but we don't want to be forced to turn back."

"There's three of us to be on the lookout," said Kit; "one might do just as well."

"Yes," said Ben; "the chances are that we shall all be looking in the same place at the same time."

"That's easily avoided," said Ted; "all we have to do is to make a proper division of labor. Ben, you can ride on the right, keep your head turned to the right and see everything on the right that there is to be seen."

"I'm on," said Ben.

"Kit can take the left, and do for the left wing what you do for the right. I myself will go in the center and keep an eye on all the ground in front of me. Bud can ride about twenty paces ahead of me. Each of you fellows can ride twenty paces, or thirty paces would be better, out on both sides, halfway between Bud and myself. I'll look out for the ground between you outsiders and myself, so that you can keep facing right and left. We'll go forward at a walk till the moon sets, and then at daylight we'll start off again. We'll have for a resting time the hours between the setting of the moon and daylight, and we'll move slowly across the desert in a diamond formation, with Bud Morgan at one point, Kit at one, Ben at one, and myself bringing up the rear. I will lead the extra burro with the water behind me. Does everybody understand?"

"All right," grunted Ben.

"I'm ready."

"Jumpin' sandhills! I'm wise."

And so the four rough riders started on their search for the water-sign.

CHAPTER IV.

IN SHOSHONE LAND.

In silence the four boys rode steadily ahead, their eyes bent on the ground. It is safe to say that, owing to Ted's plan, there was not much that escaped their notice, for the night was beautifully clear, and as the moon rose higher and higher in the heavens, it seemed almost like daylight. It was cold. It is always cold at night in the Land of Little Rain. The boys rolled down their sleeves and buttoned up their shirts. Then they put on their coats, and even then they shivered, for after the intolerable heat of the day even a moderately cold place seemed arctic.

The horses moved forward steadily through the night. They all walked at about the same pace, and the burro ridden by Bud moved forward at a sort of irregular trot that sent Bud shaking up and down in the saddle at a great rate. Not once was the diamond formation of the four rough riders broken, and not once did the boys lift their eyes from the ground which they were scanning so closely.

Bud kept his eyes fixed on the polar star, holding his little compass in one hand and the reins of his burro in the other. He laid a course as straight and even as ever a mariner laid at sea, and he had this advantage over a pilot at sea that he had the distant hilltops and variations in the sky line to aid him, and could take a line on various peaks and thus insure direct travel north.

Presently the moon reached its zenith and began to drop slowly through the sky. Its rays were now on the left hand of the boys as they rode northward, and the light was even better for their object than before. But after a while, as it sunk lower toward the horizon, its rays began to cast long, black shadows from every little obstacle in the desert, from every stone, every tuft of sage bush, every dwarfed yucca tree, every clump of mesquite. The country was now more indistinct before their eyes, and it was much harder to see.

Ted sat up in the saddle and called aloud to Bud.

"Pull up there, Bud," he said. "It's time to camp for a while. We'll wait till daybreak here. The light is growing dim. Pull up where you are."

Bud checked his burrow, and Ben and Kit, riding out on the wings, wheeled their steeds in toward Ted. A moment later the four boys were dismounted, and the saddles and water kegs stripped from the backs of the animals. Then the boys spread their blankets out on the sand, rolled themselves up in them, and very soon were in dreamless sleep. They were in a perilous position, the chances of their finding water were very slim and a horrible death from thirst was the only alternative. But they all slept soundly, nevertheless, for those who ride all day and throw the lariat, whose life is in the open and whose lungs are filled with sweet, fresh air, are seldom troubled by bad dreams, and know not the meaning of sleeplessness.

Ted was the first of the four to stir in his blanket and awake. He could see the dark shadows of his three comrades, and the black blots that marked the places where the two burros and three horses were taking their rest. All the sky was deep blue, and the stars were still twinkling faintly away off in the ether, but there was a light gray tinge in the east, and as Ted watched, the distant hilltops suddenly turned pink in a moment's time, as though some great searchlight had been turned upon them.

Sunrise was coming, and Ted, shivering with the cold and still rolled in his blankets, raised himself upon his elbow to look at it. Those who have seen the sunrise at sea, or in Italy, over quiet pastoral landscapes, or over mountain peaks, may think it beautiful, but they know nothing of the wonders of a sunrise in the Land of Little Rain.

They know what it is for the sun to come slowly above the horizon, for black to change gradually to pink, then to red and then to the bright light of day. But they know nothing of the sudden magic of sunrise in the American desert. They cannot picture to themselves the sight of the distant peaks turning from black to vermilion in a few seconds, and then the sun itself, all yellow, and great and golden, shooting suddenly above the horizon and flooding the whole world with light in an instant.

Ted saw all this and felt his eyes dazzled by the sudden change from light to darkness. Already he could feel a kindly heat stealing through his chilled body, and he knew that a little later the temperature would be insufferable. He had little need to arouse his companions. The sudden dawn of day had awakened them all, and they lost no time in saddling their steeds, for they knew that travel would be bearable for only a short time, and that as soon as the sun's rays would be vertical instead of horizontal, as they now were, the heat would be tremendous.

For breakfast each had a swallow of water and a few biscuits. The horses were allowed each a small measure of oats and a few gulps of the precious water. As for the hardy little burros, they had been munching away at sage and mesquite brush, which no horse could eat, and from which they managed to get both food and water.

In a surprisingly short space of time the boys were mounted and pushing on again, riding in the same formation as the night before.

Presently they felt so warm that they could lay their jackets aside and roll up their sleeves, and then they felt tiny streams of perspiration trickle down their faces. They were in for another broiling day, and they knew it. The horses knew it, too, for they moved forward despondently, with drooping heads and heavy, slow hoofs.

Suddenly Ben Tremont raised his hand and cried aloud.

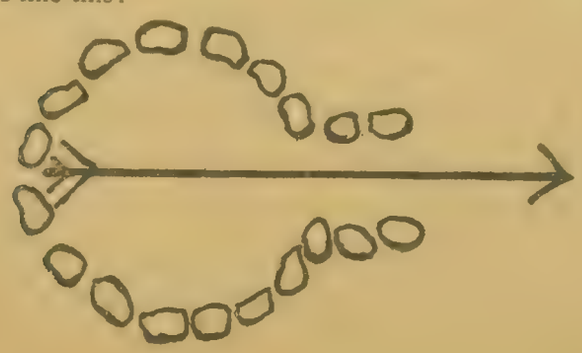
It was not often that Ben Tremont showed excitement about anything. The big, muscular fellow was as easy-going and phlegmatic as any man you could find, but at the present moment he showed more excitement than ever he had shown in his life before.

"Come on, boys!" he yelled. "Here's something! I don't know what it means, but there's some meaning to it, and perhaps some of you fellows may be able to understand it."

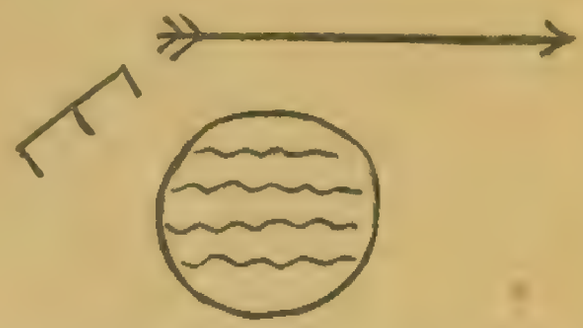
The other boys spurred over toward Ben without very much delay.

"Look at this," cried Ben; "see here. What does that mean? That's picture writing of Indians, or some such people, or I'm mistaken."

He pointed to the ground a little way to one side of him. There was a long, flat piece of stone exposed to view. Where it had been exposed to the air for a long time it was as black as night, but clefts and crevices here and there showed that underneath the surface the stone was a silvery white. In it there were two pieces of carving, cut deep into the rock. The first was like this:



A little farther on there was another figure, something like this:



The boys gathered around and looked at these peculiar signs.

"By Jove!" said Kit, "I've never seen anything like that before. It looks as if it might mean something, but what does it mean?"

"Maybe it's the water-sign that Speed spoke of," hazarded Ben Tremont.

"What do you think, Bud?" asked Ted. "Have you ever seen anything like that before? Do you think that that is the sign that Speed meant when he was talking to you before his death?"

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud; "it must be! We've found it all right, but I never thought we would. That's Shoshone picture-writing all right, but brand me fer a maverick ef I kin read it! We are up in the country of lost borders now an' I shouldn't wonder ef we hed tracked pretty near ter Shoshone Land. Thet's sure Shoshone Injun picter-writing. Jumpin' sandhills! Thet's what it is, all right!'

"Can you read it?" asked Ben.

"I never was wise ter ther Shoshone writin's," said Bud, shaking his head slowly; "my experience with ther reds hes been more up among ther Sioux an' ther Winnebagos. This southern country down here in California isn't as fermilier ter me as the country further north, or back there in the pan-handle State, where we rid out from."

"It may be a water-sign all right," said Kit Sum-

mers, "but it won't be very much use to us if we can't make it out."

"Don't worry about that, old man," said Ted, who had been studying the carved rock in silence; "we'll make it out all right. It just takes a little time to look it over."

"Do you think you can decipher it?" asked Ben. "You never studied picture-writing before, did you?"

"No, I never made a study of it; I think this is about the first piece of real picture-writing I ever saw, but I have read articles in the magazines about it, and I know that a little common sense and perseverance will help you to make out the most of it."

"Jumpin' sandhills, Ted!" said Bud Morgan, admiringly; "I wisht I hed yore head. I'd be a rich man ter-day instid of an ornery cow puncher ef I had."

"Cut that out," smiled Ted, "and just tell me what you make out of that sign."

"What do I make of it?" said Bud, squinting gravely at the rock. "I take it thet thet arrer carved on it points somewheres—maybe ter where we kin find water."

"That's about the way I guess it," said Ted.

"But there are two arrows," said Kit, "one on each sign."

"That doesn't make any difference," said Ted; "they both point the same way."

"So they do," said Ben Tremont; "I didn't notice that before."

"You see that arrow pointing out of the horseshoe-like sign," said Ted. "There can't be much doubt as to what that means. It simply signifies that if you walk in that direction you'll come to water."

"What does the ring with the wavy lines inside of it mean?" asked Kit.

"I'm coming to that," said Ted; "I think it's an older sign than the other. Look closely. Doesn't it seem to you, when you look at it more closely, that those deep lines cut in the rock are darker at the bottom than the lines in the other sign?"

"Thet's shore right," said Bud, "but that don't help me much to understand it. What do you make of it?"

"That rock," said Ted, "where it is splintered, and not so much exposed to the air, is very light in color. If you could chip a piece of it off I believe that it would show up as white as snow."

With the butt of his revolver Ben Tremont knocked off a corner of the rock. Inside, where it was newly broken and not exposed to the air, it was of dazzling, silvery whiteness.

"You see," said Ted, "that it is only the action of the air on that rock through a long period of time that turns it black as it is on the outside. It stands to reason that, in the sign with the circle and wavy lines when we find that it is much darker than the other and much more nearly the color of the face of the rock, we are looking at an older carving."

"Plato, thou reasonest well," said Ben Tremont. "You're a good guesser, Ted."

"I don't care whether it's guessing or not," said Ted, "so long as we can make something out of it and learn where the water is."

"Whew!" whistled Ben. "My mouth and throat are about as dry as the sand out there. Hurry up, Ted, and find the water. I think this is about the first time I ever was in a hurry in my life."

"Well," said Ted, "I think that both of those arrows point to water. Water is about the only thing that a man would be hunting hereabouts, and a sign to point the way to anything would naturally be a sign indicating the way to a place where water might be found. This old sign, I think, indicates the distance of the water from here. Those lines inside the circle are some units of measurement, such as miles or leagues—some Indian unit of measurement. If you walk in the direction in which that arrow points for the distance,

whatever it is, indicated by the wavy lines drawn in the circle, you will come to the water."

"Hooray!" said Bud. "We've solved ther riddle! Jumpin' sandhills! I'm thirsty."

"Don't mention thirst," growled Ben Tremont, "you only make mine feel the worse. Don't talk about it."

"What does that thing that looks like an E mean?"

"That's more than I can say," said Ted, "and I don't suppose that it is necessary for us to worry about that. We might as well camp here now, as it is pretty late in the day. There's an outcropping of rock that will give us some shelter. We can make better time by waiting now and then, pushing on in the cool of the evening when we are rested and fresher. We have enough water to last us through the day, anyway."

Ten minutes later the horses were unsaddled and hobbled, and the boys, getting what shelter they could from the shadow of the rock, were dozing through the hot noon.

CHAPTER V.

WATER AT LAST!

When the water barrels were lifted from the backs of the burro that bore them so patiently and the horses of the young rough riders heard the liquid sound of their contents splashing about in them, it was all that the boys could do to control the animals. They were all parched with thirst, and the sound of the splashing of the water, as the two barrels which contained the scanty supply were dropped to the ground, set them frantic. They neighed and whinnied wildly, and two of them, rearing up in the air, made a dash out across the country. But Ted sprang between them. All the boys had dismounted, and Ted was the nearest of the four to the horses which had bolted.

He managed to grasp a bridle rein in each hand, although he had to leap wildly through the air to do so. Then when his feet struck the ground again, he bore back and down on the reins with all his might.

The horses reared and pawed the air, but the strength of the young rough rider was too much for them, and he finally pulled them down to a standstill.

"I feel as much for the animals as I do for myself," said Kit; "hear them neigh and scream. This thirst and heat is terrible, and they feel it more than we do."

"Even the burros are showing signs of distress now," said Ben Tremont, "and I can tell you that it's a pretty cold day when a burro caves in."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud Morgan, "is this here what ye call a cold day? Ef it is, what in thunder do ye mean by a hot day?"

"We have nothing to give those animals to drink," said Kit; "don't you think that it would be better to move right on for this water that the sign indicates and then let them rest their fill? If they wait here through the heat of the day without anything to drink the chances are that they will be too weak to go very fast."

"There isn't any doubt," said Ted, "that if they waited here all day without any water they would be frantic and ready to die at nightfall. But I don't intend them to do that. I intend to give them some of this water."

"What?" said Kit. "We haven't enough for ourselves."

"We can divide it all round," said Ted, "and give each animal a share. Then we can leave the empty water barrels behind us and travel light with fresh horses."

"But what if we shouldn't strike this water?" said Ben. "We wouldn't have a drop with us."

"I don't think that it makes very much difference," said Ted; "if we don't strike the springs we are in for it anyway, and a few drops more or less won't alter

the complexion of things. But I am perfectly confident that we will strike a spring."

"It's shore taking an awful chance," said Bud Morgan, "we wouldn't hev a solitary drop then."

"If we don't do that we'll leave some dead animals out here on the desert," said Ted. "Just glance at those horses and look at their condition. If they don't get water to-day they'll never hold out. My object is to get the whole bunch to the water alive and well, and the plan I suggested is the only way."

Kit dashed his hat petulantly on the ground.

"Confound it!" he said, "here I am parched with thirst. I was looking forward all day to some water now—a few mouthfuls, and I find that Ted has a plan to give the most of the water to the horses. I suppose he thinks that it's better to lose me than to lose one of the horses."

The heat and suffering had gotten upon Kit's nerves a little, and the dark-eyed boy's temper was evidently in a very uncertain condition. Ted looked at him in silence for a moment before he spoke.

"If you feel that you can't live through the day with your share of water," he said, gently, "you may have mine. I can manage through the afternoon without any more, I guess."

Kit was going to make some other petulant remark when he glanced in Ted's face and heard the offer he made. He saw that the young rough rider was suffering fully as much from the thirst as he was himself. Ted's lips were parched and cracking with the heat, his face was sunken and lined, and his tongue was dry, so that he seemed scarcely able to articulate. But still there was the same old steady smile that Kit knew so well in his eyes, and there was not the faintest trace of impatience or anger in his face.

A sudden change came over the dark-eyed boy. Those who know Kit say that, although he often loses his temper, it generally does not take him very long to find it again. He rushed impulsively toward Ted, holding out his hand.

"Forgive me, Ted," he cried, "I didn't mean to complain. And you don't think that I want more than my own share of the water, do you? You don't think, do you, that I would take yours from you? Divide the water up as you suggest. I'd rather give you my share than take yours. I think your plan is the best, of course. I was hot and out of temper when I spoke."

"We are all pretty hot," said Ted, laying his hand on Kit's shoulder, "and as for being out of temper in these surroundings I don't think that anyone could blame you for that."

"Well," said Ben, "now that it's all settled, let's divide this water up and then feed ourselves a few dog biscuits and get to sleep. It seems to me that you have a lot of confidence in that water, Ted."

"I don't think that my confidence is misplaced," said Ted. "I'm pretty sure that the water sign speaks the truth, and I'm pretty sure that we'll strike the spot we are looking for before another day dawns. We can travel all night, you know, to-night. We don't have to depend on the moon. Both those arrows point due north, and that's the way we have been going. It will be cool to-night, and you bet that as soon as they scent water the horses and mules will hit it up at a pretty brisk pace."

The water was now divided among the frantic animals, each of the boys being given a small portion. They all drank greedily, but none of them had any appetite for food. The sun was blistering hot, and the shadow of the rocks was scanty, but the boys made the best of it, and, after hobbling the horses securely, stretched themselves out on the hot sand, covered their baking faces with their sombreros, and tried to snatch a little sleep. It felt like lying on the top of a hot stove, but one after another they all dropped off, and when they awoke, late in the afternoon, they felt a great

deal better and cooler. They were still parched with thirst, and the knowledge that there was not now a single drop of water in the black water kegs that lay on the sand beside them, made their thirst all the worse. It also made them in a hurry about saddling up and starting, and it was not long till the four boys were off again. The sun was dropping lower and lower, and already it was perceptibly cooler.

The horses seemed to have some idea that there was water to be found to the northward, for they all headed that way instinctively and moved forward at a fairly good walk. The water that had been given to them had freshened them up a good deal, and the young rough riders were traveling as light as they could, getting off their horses and walking beside them for a mile every now and then in order to give the jaded animals a little rest on their way.

Presently the sun dropped behind the horizon, and the boys, already acquainted with the sudden changes of temperature in the Land of Little Rain, began to put on their coats.

A cool wind sprang up from the northwest as if by magic, and blew a great cloud of biting, stinging sand almost directly into the faces of the young rough riders.

"Whew!" said Ben, as the storm of dust almost blinded him. "This will blow me off my horse in about three minutes if it keeps up."

"It's a little sandstorm," said Bud. "They have worser ones than these up in Colorado, but I think ye'd better not try to look inter the eye of ther wind er ye'll get yer own eye blowed out. Pull yer coats up and yer hats down, an' duck yer head till it's over."

By one accord the horses had come to a standstill, and all stood with their heads bowed, allowing the wind to howl over them. It came in great puffs and blasts, now a veritable sandstorm. Good-sized pebbles sometimes came sailing through the air, and all the boys found that the most prudent way to do was to follow Bud's advice.

At length the wind subsided to a gentler breeze, and the boys were able to look up without getting their eyes filled with the flying dust.

They were slowly riding up the side of one of the long slopes in the tilted mesa, and the wind, having gone down a great deal, had shifted around to the north and was now blowing directly in their faces. The moon was just sending its first rays of silver over the rim of hills of the eastern horizon, and the stars were shining brightly overhead.

Ted Strong was riding a little in advance, mounted on one horse and leading a burro. Suddenly the little mule pricked up its ears and pulled out ahead of the horse. As they reached the top of the hill there was a new smell in the breeze that blew in his nostrils. He tossed back his head and gave a great, long bray. Then, breaking away from Ted, he started forward at a mad gallop. And, as by one accord, the horses neighed and followed him, utterly beyond the control of their riders. They smelled water, and it was impossible now to hold them in. Ted's water-sign had told the truth.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE QUICKSAND.

From that moment on there was no holding in the animals. They neighed loudly in chorus, lowered their heads as if by one impulse, and went careering across the country, through the night, at their topmost speed.

The wind that the boys felt blowing in their faces now bore on its breath some traces of the distant water springs, and the horses knew what it meant. The little burro mule had been the first to snuff the damp smell, but the others had smelt it the next moment, and now they were headed straight for the water for which they longed so much.

Even Ben Tremont's mighty grasp could not check in the slightest the speed of the pony he rode, and, after a first attempt to check the horses the boys, at a word from Ted, let them have their heads.

The haste and enthusiasm of the animals was infectious, and the boys themselves burst into a wild cheer and peered eagerly into the distance ahead of them to catch the first glimpse of the springs for which they were heading.

Up another long slope they charged with scarce a falter on the part of the animals. Then, on the crest

of the hill, the horses and burros broke into another wild chorus of cries which echoed far into the night.

The moon was well above the hilltops now, and its silvery rays were shining softly over all the country round about. From the top of the long slope the boys had a clear view for miles in front of them and below them.

Afar off in the distance they saw something that cheered their hearts and made them burst into another wild yell of satisfaction. It was something that looked in the distance like a great snake winding its sluggish way across the plain.

It was water.

As the boys drew nearer and nearer to the stream they could see that its banks were fringed with trees, cottonwood, huisache, and a taller growth of mesquite and yucca. For some distance out on the prairie, on either side of this water course, the ground was fresh and green, full of a thousand flowering shrubs and bright with wild flowers, a marked contrast to the Land of Little Rain which the boys had just crossed.

Nearer and nearer to the water they swung, never decreasing the steady gallop for a moment. The burros in their eagerness to reach the stream kept up with the horses, and the whole cavalcade charged forward in a solid bunch.

"Hurrah, boys!" yelled Bud Morgan. "Ted Strong's water-signs were all right! We've struck it right this here time. Hit it up there, ye cayuse! Hunch yerself! Git ter ther water! I'm as thirsty as you are, an' thirstier, I reckon."

"I'm in a hurry for once in my life," said Ben Tremont: "this horse can't travel too quick for me."

"Look how fresh and green the country about here is," said Kit. "There are woods up there beyond. Can't you see them shining in the moonlight and mountains beyond? It's a beautiful country. We'll find deer here, I'll bet, and plenty of all sorts of hunting. I wonder what part of the country we are in, anyhow."

"We're in Shoshone Land," said Bud. "I know this here is about where ther Shoshone Indians hang out."

"Have they a reservation here?" asked Ben Tremont.

"Not them," said Bud; "there is some Shoshone reservations farther north, I think, but not down hereabouts. These here Shoshones what hang around here ain't no reservation Indians. They're the real thing in a wild Indian, an' they live by huntin' jest ther same as their forefathers did fer the last steen centuries, I reckon. They claim as how they're a mighty ole tribe an' descended from the ole original Indian direc'."

"Who is the old original Indian?" asked Kit, as they galloped onward.

"Search me," said Bud. "I guess as he must have been the chap as first come here an' discivered ther place."

All the boys were in good spirits now. They were rapidly drawing nearer and nearer to the river that they saw before them, and they chatted gayly among themselves in spite of the speed at which their horses carried them forward.

Every now and then Bud would burst forth into a wild "ki-yi" of delight, and his little burro mule, seeming to understand the mood of its rider, always joined him in this demonstration by neighing and braying at the loudest note in its compass.

"You have some knowledge of the country about here," said Ben Tremont, riding alongside of Bud; "what water do you take this to be?"

"It's some river or creek that runs down inter the Colorado. This is pretty high ground about here, an' from ther way that river winds off I think as how it finally ends up somewhere near ther grand canyon."

"Do you know the name of it?" asked Ben.

"Nope," said Bud, "but that don't matter nohow. All I want is ter get a good, big, long drink out of it, an' after that they can name it anything they gol durned please. I'll always swear it's ther finest river in America. It don't matter what they name it so long as it's good to drink."

"I think from its position, and from the study I made of the map before we started out into the Land of Little Rain, that it is a small tributary river known as Ceriso Creek. As Bud says, it runs into the Colorado River. From what I've heard about this locality we are liable to meet some wandering bands of Shoshones here. They are utterly wild, the Shoshones,

something like their neighbors, the Piutes, farther north, and we want to be careful not to get into any trouble with them, for there are only four of us, and we are a good, long way from any Indian reservation, let me tell you, or from any military post where we can get help. This is unclaimed Indian land, the property of the Shoshones, and the United States has no claim upon it as yet. I have no doubt that later on, when the country is more thickly populated, the government will see fit to purchase this hunting ground from the Indians, and then to sell it off in quarter sections to settlers who are willing to pay a nominal price for it."

"I wouldn't care if there were three hundred Shoshone Indians all in their war paint and feathers between me and that river," said Kit Summers; "I'd ride on, anyway. I'm so thirsty now that the whole Shoshone tribe wouldn't stop me."

"I don't think that they are likely to try," said Ted, "although I've heard of their objecting to the presence of white men on their hunting grounds."

"Let 'em object," said Bud Morgan; "we've got four Winchester carbines here an' four Colts an' plenty of cartridges. Let 'em object. Jumpin' sandhills! we'll jest sail inter them an' wipe ther tribe out."

"I don't know about that, either," said Ted. "I have no fancy to get into a fight with the Indians."

They were now only a few hundred yards from the water and racing down a sharp, grassy slope that led to the stream. They could see that the waters of the river were rather low, for there was a white, glistening bank of sand exposed on either side. There was no holding back the horses now, although all the boys tried to check them and keep from running out in the bed of the stream. The little burro which had broken away from Ted a mile or so back was already wallowing in the cool waters of the creek, and, with whinnys of delight, the other burro and the horses dashed in after it.

In they went, splashing wildly, the boys shouting at the top of their voices, and the horses dipping their heads into the water and drinking deeply.

After allowing their horses to take a first mad gambol in the water, the boys checked them up a little and allowed them to drink moderately. They themselves, as they sat upon the backs of their steeds, were wet up to their knees with the deliciously cold water, but they did not mind that. They leaned forward from their saddle and filled their canteens, and then satisfied their thirst.

"My," said Ben Tremont, "that river must have gone down about three feet since we struck it! I've drunk so much, and my horse has drunk so much, that I don't believe there'll be enough left for you other fellows."

"Jumpin' sandhills, but it's good!" said Bud Morgan, taking his canteen away from his lips. "Thet's shore ther sweetest drink I ever tasted, Ted. I never thort water could taste so cool an' good. It's great! I——" The remainder of the sentence was lost in the canteen, which was again raised to the lips of the cowboy.

Ted himself watered his own horse and managed to catch the little burro that had gotten away from him. He filled his canteen, took a long, slow drink, and then, wheeling his horse and dragging the unwilling burro after him, started for the bank.

The horse, too, was unwilling to leave the water, but Ted did not intend to have him drink any more just then, and when it came to a question of deciding between Ted and the horse he rode, it generally turned out that Ted had the upper hand.

He was forced to put the spurs to his horse this time, and, although the animal bucked up and reared considerably, Ted finally forced him up on the sandy beach that bordered the stream.

Of the four boys Ted was nearest the shore, and, as he wheeled his horse, he called upon the others to follow him.

"Wait a minute," said Kit, who had spurred out into the river farther than any of them, "we haven't had enough of this stream yet. I tell you, it's great! I'm going to let my horse drink some more."

"I don't want my horse to drink any more," said Ben Tremont, "but I find it mighty hard to stop him."

"Pull him up sharp," called Bud; "yank him up short an' give him ther spurs. Watch me. My little burro

wants ter stay here, an' he is stubborner nor any hoss, but I'll make him get out! Jumpin' mavericks!"

Bud suited the action to the word, and there was a terrible splashing as the burro he rode fought to remain in the stream. Bud, however, finally forced him up on the bank. He then turned around to look back at the other two boys.

Ben was urging his horse toward the shore, but Kit Summers was out almost in midstream.

"Look out, Kit!" called Bud, "yer may be carried away!"

"Come out here and feel this current." called back Kit. "It's awfully strong."

"I don't want ter feel no current," said Bud.

"Wheel around and get back, Kit," said Ted, "it may be dangerous out there."

"Not a bit!" shouted Kit, his figure plain and distinct on the moonlit water. "It's very shallow, although it is rather swift."

"Grab my bridle and pull this nag out, Ted," said Ben Tremont. "I can't push him up that bank."

Ted leaned forward, grasped the bridle, and, by backing his own horse, soon led Ben's out from the water.

At that moment a wild shout came from Kit Summers.

"Help, boys!" he cried. "I've struck a quicksand!"

CHAPTER VII.

TED'S DARING.

Ted grasped the situation in an instant of time. He heard a great splashing and a wild neighing from the horse which Kit rode. Then he heard Kit's despairing yell for help.

The next instant there was a wild snort of terror from the horse, and Kit went splash over its head. A moment later he appeared above the water. His face was as pale as death, and he struggled frantically with his hands to keep above water.

"Keep your horses away from here, boys!" he yelled. "There's a quicksand here. I'm caught in it, and my horse is caught in it. I can feel it sucking me down and down."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud, "I ain't got no lariat ter this saddle. Ted, have you got one?"

The young rough rider did not answer. Already he had taken the coil of his lariat from his saddle pommel and was stringing it out in his hand.

"Quick!" cried Kit, in a faint voice; "I'm sinking in this horrid mud!"

"Sling a lariat round the horse, Ben," called Ted, in a steady, even voice. "There isn't much time to lose. It will be below the surface in a moment."

At the same time the young rough rider swung his own lariat around his head and threw it. It went out in a great sweep, opening wide in a noose as it sailed through the air.

Splash!

It struck the water, sending up spouts of moisture in a complete circle around the head of Kit Summers, which was all of him that appeared above the surface by this time.

When Kit had been thrown from his horse he had struck bottom, and his nose and mouth had been filled with water. He had struggled frantically to regain his footing, and presently had arisen on his feet and discovered that, although the current was swift, the water at that point was not as high as his breast. At the same time he noticed that the ground underneath the water was very soft and yielding. The next instant he had sunk in it to his ankles, and it seemed to the astonished boy that the ground, the soft mud underneath the river, was seizing hold of his ankles and dragging him down.

He lifted his feet, but they sank deeper and deeper. It actually felt, such was the grip of the quicksand into which he had fallen, as if some unseen hands were grasping his feet and dragging him down, down into the unseen depths below.

Then it was that Kit had screamed to Ted. He fought wildly with his hands, trying to swim clear of the quicksand. His horse had already sunk so that only its head was above the surface of the stream, and it was snorting in terror.

For a moment, Kit, as he sank lower and lower,

could see the figure of Ted Strong clearly outlined in the moonlight, sitting on his horse on the bank.

It seemed to the boy, who had been caught in the grip of the deadly quicksand, that the young rough rider was staring at him and doing nothing to help him. Kit screamed again. Then he saw Ted's arm shoot out and the lariat came whirling through the air. He heard the splash as it struck the water about him.

The quicksand was dragging him lower and lower now. He sank farther and farther as he grasped for the lariat. He was so low in the water now that he had to bend his neck and hold his head away back to keep his nostrils above the water.

It seemed to him that the lariat had floated away from him, for with wildly groping fingers he had reached for it in all directions, and had not been able to grasp it. He could see the bank no longer nor the figure of the young rough rider. The water was bubbling in his ears, it was over his head, then——

He felt something tighten under his arms about his body. His head was below water now, and he was holding his breath, although it seemed as if his head and chest must burst. But a great throb of joy ran through his heart, for he knew that Ted had caught him in the noose of his lariat under the arms. Tighter and tighter it drew. Then for a moment Kit felt as if he were about to be pulled apart. The lariat was pulling him through the water, upward and to the bank, and the quicksand, which was up about his legs by this time, was dragging him back, back and down like some octopus which had caught him in its tentacles. For a moment it seemed as if the cord would break, and Kit felt as though his legs would be pulled off. Then he came up through the swirling water. He was on the surface now and being dragged along like a fish at the end of a line. Then he was tumbling and splashing head first through shallow water, and then he was lying on the bank, high and dry, breathless and exhausted, but saved.

As soon as the lariat had been thrown Ted had wheeled and turned his horse up the bank. The wide noose had caught a human fish in its grasp, and the cord held and Kit was dragged up out of the quicksand by the tough little pony which Ted was riding.

Kit had little time to lie on the bank, for a second later he heard Ted's voice ringing in his ears.

"Set free that lariat!" called the young rough rider. "We need it for this horse!"

In a half daze Kit loosened the rope and passed it up over his head.

It was jerked away in an instant.

Kit had been for a moment half stupefied by his experience. He now dragged himself to his feet and looked at what was going on.

Bud, and Ben, and Ted were engaged in an effort to free his horse from the quicksand in which it was bogged.

The horse had sunk so low that only its head was visible above the surface.

Ben Tremont had made a cast with a lariat and fastened it around the animal's head. Then he spurred up the bank. But he could not budge the horse. It had been caught too firmly in the quicksand.

Ted immediately hauled in his own lariat and passed the end of it to Bud.

"I'm going out there," he said; "you pay it out to me. The only way is to swim out there and fasten that to the legs of the horse, one by one. You can free them one after the other that way, and then we can throw the horse on its side. It won't sink quickly, and we can drag it out before the quicksand has a good grip on it again."

"Jumpin' sandhills, Ted!" said Bud. "Ther danger! You'll get caught in thar sure as yer put a foot ter ther ground."

"But I'm not going to put a foot to the ground," said Ted, coolly; "the water's a pretty good depth where that horse is. I'm going to swim. You wind the end of the lariat around your saddle horn."

"I've done it," said Bud. "What's next?"

"Both you and Ben keep your eye on me, and when I signal, both pull away, driving your horses up the bank."

The young rough rider was as cool and collected as

if this quicksand experience by moonlight were an everyday affair.

Already he was off his horse and had thrown his jacket and leggings on the ground. He kicked off his shoes and darted down toward the water in his blue shirt and tight-fitting khaki riding breeches.

Splash! He went into it head first and swam out toward the struggling horse in the water. He held the end of his own lariat in his teeth, and he swept through the water at racing speed.

When he reached the side of the horse he whirled about and seemed to leap into the air. Then he dived down, head first.

The moonlight sent a sort of amber light through the greenish flood and Ted kept his eyes open as he dived.

He could see the hoofs of the horse driven down into the waxy black mud at the bottom as the current carried him downstream. He went around the horse under water, and when he came up the rope was fastened around one of the animal's fore legs.

Then he came up again, but it was only to get breath, for he did not signal to Bud and Ben, who were watching from the bank.

While he remained swimming on the surface he rapidly unloosed the coil of Ben's lariat from the animals neck. There was no time to lose. Taking a deep breath, he dived again. When he came up the second time it was after a long stay under water, and he came up considerably farther down the stream than the place where the horse was. He had been fastening the other lariat around the other fore leg of the horse, and had to delve into the waxy mud of the quicksand to do so.

In the meantime, Bud, and Ben, and Kit had been watching for his appearance with bated breath. The seconds during which he remained underneath the surface seemed hours to them, and they had almost given him up for lost when his head shot up above the surface.

He did not wait to swim back to the side of the horse, but waved one arm wildly to the boys on the bank.

"Pull!" he yelled.

Like automatons Ben, on his horse, and Bud, on his burro, wheeled around and started back from the stream.

"Stop!" yelled Ted, and they came to a standstill a moment later.

Ted was doing daring work in the stream, but he could not have had two steadier, cooler, or abler assistants than Bud Morgan and Ben Tremont. Although they fully appreciated the risk that Ted was taking, they did not let their anxiety interfere with their coolness or collectedness for an instant.

The two fore legs of the animal were now dragged out of the mud and held up by the lariats.

"Ease off!" called out Ted, swimming over toward the horse.

A moment later one of the lariats was off and Ted dived again.

He came up soon this time, having fastened it about the off hind leg of the horse.

"Pull!" he cried. "Ease off!"

Another leg was freed from the quicksand, and at the same time Ted hurled himself with all his force against the side shoulder of the horse.

This threw it over on its side and prevented it from striking out and having its hoofs caught in the quicksand once more. Like lightning Ted worked, loosening up the two lariats.

Then he dived and came up weak and breathless.

He could not call out, but he waved his arm.

Bud and Ben drove up on the bank, and all four legs of the animal were free. It was now on its side, sinking into the quicksand once more, but sinking very slowly.

Ted was out of breath. His heart was beating like a trip hammer, his chest felt as though it would burst. He was longing to get ashore and throw himself on the bank, but he knew that if the horse were to be saved he must not give up yet. Once more he dived, and when he came up he was exhausted, but both lariats were passed about the animal's haunches and neck.

"Haul away!" yelled Ted, with his last breath, and a moment later the horse was dragged out, saved.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHOSHONES.

Ted was so tired out that he could scarcely swim ashore, but he had the satisfaction of seeing the horse which he had rescued get up and shake itself, none the worse for its experience in the quicksand.

Half an hour later the young rough rider was drying his clothes before a blazing camp fire on which a pot of fragrant coffee was sizzling. The boys made a good supper that night, after having staked out the horses and mules near by. It was so cool that they all had ravenous appetites, and, as for thirst, they had no reason for suffering from that now, for they went to sleep with the liquid music of Ceriso Creek sounding in their ears.

When Ted awoke the next morning the first object that met his eyes was a tall redskin wrapped in a blanket, who was standing a little distance off, looking silently at the camp of the four boys with bright, shifting eyes.

Ted knew that he was in the country of the Shoshones, and knew that he was likely to see some of the tribe at any time, but he had not expected to see one of them so early in the morning. With an exclamation of astonishment, that awakened the other boys, he threw back his blanket and leaped to his feet.

The Indian, who was tall and slightly bent, smiled when he saw the surprise of the young rough rider.

He dropped a corner of his blanket, exposing a muscular shoulder and arm, quite bare and naked. Then he reached out his hand to the young rough rider.

"How are you?" he said, in perfectly good English. "I am glad to see you."

Ted gasped with surprise and looked at this Indian again, for he certainly had not expected such a greeting from him.

The Indian was well over six feet high, spare, muscular, and slightly bent.

His hair, which hung down his back in two braids, was as black as night, but he was evidently old, for his face was covered with a thousand wrinkles, carved deeply into the skin by the wind and weather of many seasons spent outdoors in the open.

His face was big, and broad, and flat, as the faces of most Indians are, but there was a kindly, steady look in his beady, black eyes which Ted rather liked.

Ted glanced around to see if this red had any companions, but he saw none.

He held out his hand.

"I am well," he said. "We have just crossed the desert, following the water-sign carved on the rock. My name is Ted Strong, and my companions and I were lost in the Death Valley and came here to find water."

"This Shoshone Land," said the Indian, looking around him; "no white men come here often. I medicine man of tribe—Winnenap is my name. The camp is there."

Winnenap waved a skinny hand over toward a clump of trees on Ted's right, from which Ted could now see emerging a column of blue smoke which marked the place of an Indian camp fire.

"I walked out here in the morning to pick herbs," said the medicine man, "and I find camp of paleface."

Ted saw that this medicine man was a rather intelligent fellow, and decided that it would be a good move to get on the right side of him if he wished to avoid trouble with the Shoshones, through whose country he must travel. He invited him to stay for breakfast, which invitation the Indian received by grunting in a satisfied manner and squatting down on the ground.

Bud Morgan lost no time in starting a fire and getting breakfast ready, and, in the meantime, Kit, and Ben, and Ted squatted on the ground and conversed with Winnenap.

They found that the medicine man had formerly lived farther north at one of the Piute Indian agencies, and had there learned to speak English fairly well, and had also acquired some of the rudiments of an education.

Then he had come farther south again to his own country, and had been accepted by his tribe, owing to his learning, as a medicine man.

Winnenap, having told these things, shook his head and gazed steadily at the ground.

"Medicine man heap bad job," he said, "heap kill if Indians sick."

"What?" said Kit. "They kill you if Indians get sick?"

"If much sickness it must be fault of medicine man," said Winnenap; "they say he heap bad witch doctor, can't chase spirits away. They kill medicine man."

"Jeewhittaker!" said Ben Tremont, "the job isn't such a cinch after all."

Ted looked keenly at Winnenap.

"You're in trouble now," he said; "there's some sickness in your tribe?"

Winnenap nodded his head.

"How many are in your village?" asked the young rough rider.

Winnenap calculated for a moment on his fingers.

"Big village," he said; "two, three hundred, maybe."

"And what's the matter with them?" asked Ted. "What's the sickness that they are suffering from?"

Winnenap passed his hand over his face and then with one finger made round indentations in the sand.

"Sickness makes go red," he said; "makes spots on face."

"Smallpox?" asked Ted.

Winnenap shook his head.

"Measles?"

"Yes," the Indian nodded, vigorously, "heap plenty sick of it. Two, three—twenty die—heap bad for medicine man."

Winnenap paused, and, with a significant gesture, drew his finger across his throat.

The boys looked at him with wide-open eyes.

"What do you mean?" asked Kit Summers.

Winnenap's stoic face did not change in the least.

"They say medicine man make bad medicine. Hold council to-day—way off—down there." The Indian pointed toward the north, "that why none of them here. To-night three come to my camp fire—sit down—no speak—Winnenap knows."

The Indian paused and again drew his finger across his throat.

Ted looked inquiringly toward Bud Morgan.

"You know something about the Shoshones," he said. "Can this be true?"

Bud nodded.

"I've heard of it often," he said; "they blame the doctor when there's sickness, and if there's much of it they kill him. Some years ago there was a lot of pneumonia, and they did the same. The white people further north put up an awful kick when they heard about it, but it wasn't no use. The government was to interfere, but it didn't interfere in time. Too durn much red tape about it."

"Why don't you skip?" asked Kit Summers.

The Indian shrugged his shoulders.

"Where to?" he said. "What good to run out there?" He pointed southward to the Land of Little Rain. "Die of thirst. Run any other way, Shoshones see me and kill me. No use."

Ted's head was bowed in thought. Suddenly he raised it and looked full in the eyes of the medicine man.

"How many miles to the nearest white settlement?" he asked.

"Nearest settlement is north—one hundred miles—Bitter Creek."

"Well," said Ted, slowly, "we are going to Bitter Creek. Two days march. None of the Shoshones will dare to interfere with a party of white men. And you, Winnenap, are going with us. We'll take you out of here. We don't know much about you, but from what I know of the Shoshones I surmise that your story is true."

Winnenap's stolid face showed the first change that it had shown since the boys had met him. It lit up for a moment, the beady eyes shone more brightly, and the stern lips almost broke into a smile. It was evident that life was dear to the old man yet. Then, in a moment, his face recovered its customary expression of Indian stolidity.

"No use," he said; "paleface heap brave—no use—too many Shoshones."

"How many in your tribe—your village, I mean?" asked Ted.

"About eighty," said the Indian.

"Well, they're not going to interfere with me if there are eight hundred," said Ted, rising to his feet. "Get saddled up, boys. There's an extra burro for Winnenap here, and we've got to reach Bitter Creek to-morrow afternoon."

There was a scene of bustle in a minute. Ten minutes later the boys were ready to start, and, with Winnenap mounted on the burro that had formerly carried the water barrels, they crossed the Ceriso, under Winnenap's guidance; carefully avoiding the quicksand in which Kit Summers had been caught the night before.

Through woods and underbrush they rode on for two miles, the Indian, to whom the boys had taken quite a liking by this time, acting as their guide.

He was evidently worried about something, for he glanced continually on all sides and urged the boys to make the best speed possible.

Winnenap rode a little ahead of the others, and, as they came into the open again, he checked his horse. Then he wheeled slowly and rode back. Ted could see him as he came, and could see that the Indian was hopeless.

"No use," he said; "Shoshones in front—tracked us—they will make you give me up—better go on alone—you are strangers—leave me to die."

CHAPTER IX.

TED AND THE SHOSHONES.

Ted Strong glanced around at his three followers.

"Boys," he said, "Winnenap says that there is a band of Shoshones ahead who are going to take him off to kill him. They probably have been watching him and us for hours, and saw us start off together. We haven't known this redskin long, and we don't know much about him. But the question is—are we going to stand by and see murder committed without interference?"

"No," said all three in low tones; but with determination.

"All right," said Ted, "that's sufficient. Now we'll ride ahead."

When they rode out into the open they saw that Winnenap's prediction had been correct. Before them, some mounted, some on foot, were twenty-five Indians in war paint and feathers.

A loud outcry arose at the appearance of the boys, and several of the redskins immediately started toward Winnenap.

But Ted Strong was expecting this. Immediately he spurred his horse between the medicine man and the approaching Indians. The others did the same, and all four wheeled around to face the Shoshones.

The braves who had run forward to seize Winnenap came to a sudden standstill.

The four young rough riders presented a very determined front. Not one of them had as yet drawn a weapon, although the hand of each was on the Winchester carbine that hung beside each saddle. They knew that Ted would try to come to a peaceable agreement and avoid hostilities as much as possible, and they also knew that a display of weapons might provoke a sudden attack on the part of the Shoshones.

For a moment there was a deadly silence. Then an Indian, mounted on a piebald pony and carrying a long lance, rode forward.

Facing Ted, he began a long speech in Indian, which Winnenap translated for Ted as it was delivered. Ted listened attentively, but at the same time his eyes were busy. He saw that the Shoshones were armed for the most part with hatchets and knives, that there was only one rifle among them, and that it looked as if it might be more dangerous to the man that used it than to the man he fired at.

The speech made by the Shoshone village chief related that the Indians had seen the white boys enter their country from the Land of Little Rain, that they had no quarrel with the white men, and that they might proceed peaceably through Shoshone Land to Bitter Creek settlement.

The chief went on to say that his scouts had informed him that Winnenap, the medicine man, had taken refuge with the paleface boys.

Winnenap, he said, was a witch doctor, who had worshiped the evil one and worked witchcraft against

the village so that many of their young men and maidens had died of a strange disease.

The village was in terror of this plague, he said, and it was known by the Shoshones, from time immemorial, that there was only one way to stop the spread of such a disease. That was to kill the witch doctor.

He concluded his speech by demanding that the boys give up the witch doctor, and wishing them a safe journey northward.

"Wouldn't that jar you?" said Bud Morgan, when he had heard the conclusion of this harangue. "Jumpin' sandhills! These here pitiful bunch o' reds hes as much nerve as if they was the whole Sioux nation. Let me turn loose on them, Ted; I'll pump holes in ther bunch."

"Let's fire at them," said Kit; "that may scare them into some respect for us. What do you say, Ben?"

"My carbine stays right where it is till they open the ball," drawled Ben; "I never trouble trouble till trouble troubles me."

"Stiddy, then," said Bud; "we'll do what Capting Ted says. But, jumpin' sandhills! I'd like ter turn loose on them there fellers!"

"Keep your weapons where they are," said Ted, sternly. "Now, Winnenap, I want you to translate everything I say into Shoshone, and tell it to your friends over there."

Ted's speech was brief and to the point. It simply said that as white men they could not stand by and see murder done, that no man was responsible for the measles, and the best preventative against it was cleanliness and an observance of the sanitary laws, and furthermore, that if Winnenap was injured, or they were interfered with in the slightest degree, the matter would be reported at the nearest fort, and the whole tribe would be gathered into a reservation and punished.

The redskins could see from the expression of Ted's face that he meant what he said. There was a long and noisy debate among them, and finally three of them rode forward toward the boys.

One of them was rather lighter in color than the others, and seemed to know a little English.

"We take Winnenap," he said. "Paleface let him go, or get killed."

"Not much!" said Ted. "Stand still or you'll be in danger of getting killed."

Ted's revolver flashed forth as he spoke, and at the same instant the other boys drew their carbines.

"Boys," said Ted, "keep those first three fellows covered, and if they move shoot their horses. I'm going to do same with the chief there—the chap with the feathers and the lance. He knows more English than he pretends to, for I watched him while I was talking to Winnenap, and he could understand the most of what I was saying."

"We'll keep 'em covered, all right," said Bud. "Jumpin' sandhills! It would be a charity ter pump some lead inter them there spavined old hosses an' put 'em out of their misery. They're starvin' ter death as it is."

"Look here," said Ted, calling to the chief, "I've got you covered! Don't move or I'll fire! Tell your men not to move either."

Ted's revolver covered the chief. For a moment the redskin looked into the muzzle. In the meantime Ted was speaking to Winnenap in an undertone.

"Make a break," he said, "sneak out to the left there and give your burro a good kick. Just get away as fast as you can. We'll hold your friends here for a while.

"Now, my friend," said Ted, turning to the chief, "if you move a hand I'll show some fancy shooting."

Just at that moment Winnenap darted off on his burro.

At the same time Ted's revolver cracked, and a feather dropped from the redskin's headdress.

"Sit still and tell your followers not to move or I'll shoot—this time at your head," said the young rough rider. "My friends have repeating rifles, and we're ripe and ready to clean out the whole bunch of you. Understand?"

Evidently the chief did understand. For a moment he hesitated. But the revolver muzzle, above which

there now curled a wreath of white smoke, now wavered a particle, and there was a steady gleam in the eyes of this paleface boy that filled the heart of the chief with fear.

He spoke to his followers in the Shoshone tongue, and, like himself, they seemed to be turned to bronze statues.

Meantime, Winnenap, mounted on a fleet-footed little burro, had disappeared over a distant hilltop, but still Ted's revolver was pointed straight at the head of the Shoshone chief, and still the carbines in the hands of the other rough riders covered his three principal followers.

With his left hand Ted Strong drew forth a gunmetal Waterbury watch from his pocket and laid it on the pommel of his saddle.

"For five minutes," he said, "you fellows must stay where you are. So you might as well rest easily and not look so nervous. Then we are going to start northward. And if we see any of you fellows hiking after us we are liable to shoot back at you just for luck. And you needn't think to catch us, for our horses are quicker than yours."

Slowly the five minutes passed. In the meantime the four rough riders and the twenty odd Indians remained seated on their horses like so many statues.

Then Ted put his watch in his pocket, and with weapons still displayed, the young rough riders cantered away, past the wondering redskins, up over the hilltops to the northward.

Near Bitter Creek they met Winnenap the next afternoon. He was not going to the town, he said, but westward into the country of the Piutes. As a token of gratitude, he handed Ted two bags from which an ominous buzz came. They were each filled with rattlesnakes.

"Keep these for a day or two," begged the Indian; "good medicine." Ted was surprised, but after a good deal of persuasion took the snakes to please the redskin. Then Winnenap bade them farewell, returned the burro, and departed on foot.

CHAPTER X.

THE BAG FILLED WITH RATTLESNAKES.

It was late at night, and Ted was about ready to go to bed. He and Bud Morgan were staying at the Waldorf Hotel, in Bitter Creek Settlement. The other two rough riders were quartered in a lodging house at the other end of the town, the Waldorf—which, despite its pretentious name, was a very small, very dirty frame structure—not being able to accommodate them.

Ted had sauntered about the two or three streets which the settlement boasted with Bud, and decided before he turned in that Bitter Creek was as squalid and disagreeable a frontier town as he had ever set eyes on. There were two or three worthless, worked-out mines near the place, and the population seemed to spend most of its time either in the saloons and dancing halls or in the gambling houses, of which the settlement, in spite of its small size and evident appearance of poverty, boasted several.

"I'm sick of this place," said Ted, as he neared the hotel once more, "I wish that a train left it to-night."

"There won't be a train till to-morrow afternoon," said Bud; "the train that goes through here in the morning is an express and it doesn't stop here. It stops down at Ceriso City, thirty miles away."

"Well, we'll take it there, then," said Ted. "I'm not going to stay in this town a minute longer than I can help. I've got several rolls of bills that belonged to Jim Speed in my possession, and I noticed a tough pair in the hotel eying me when I asked the clerk if there was a safe here where we could keep valuables."

"I know the fellers ye mean," said Bud; "jumpin' sandhills! they was a tough pair, all right. One was a slim, lean feller with a bad eye, and the other was a mulatto with a red sombrero."

"Those are the fellows," said Ted. "I was foolish to ask for a safe. I might have known that there was none here, and that if there were it would not be a very safe place. It simply attracted my friends' notice to the fact that I was carrying some valuables with me, and I'll have to be on my guard to-night. I don't expect to sleep very sound, for, besides that, it's mighty hot in my room, and I have that bag full of snakes which

Winnenap gave me. I suppose the medicine man thought that there was some charm about a rattlesnake. I didn't like to displease him by refusing them. He was grateful to us for saving his life, and I suppose it was the only thing he had to give. They'll do no harm in that bag, but I don't know what to do with them. If I turn them loose here there's going to be an awfully lively time in this town. They are the most venomous type of rattlers, the little fellows that live in the desert and move sidewise."

"I know 'em," said Bud; "sidewinders we call 'em. You keep 'em safe in that canvas bag they are in till we are crossing some crick. Then drop it overboard, and we'll be well rid of them."

"I hope the bag holds out till we get to some creek," said Ted; "it looked mighty worn and flimsy to me. And those rattlers are lively little fellows, trying to poke a hole in it every time they wake up."

Bud yawned, for he was getting very sleepy.

"I guess I'll bid you good-night, Ted," he said. "I'll see ye fu'st thing in ther mornin'; we wants ter make an early start."

"Good-night," said Ted, and he walked off to the hot little room which had been assigned to him, and, removing his outer clothing, threw himself on the bed.

Ted had taken off his belt of arms, but he threw it along the top of his pillow so that the revolver butt was near his hand as he lay with one arm supporting his head. He was soon dozing, but every now and then a smothered whirr from the bag of rattlers, which was hanging from a nail near the door, would arouse him. There was a faint light in the room, and Ted could see the bag move as the rattlers stirred about inside. Then, while watching the bag, he fell sound asleep.

It must have been an hour later when Ted suddenly awoke. A terrible, rapid buzzing filled his ears. For an instant Ted thought he was asleep, but in a flash he was broad awake, with the buzzing still in his ears. The moon had arisen by this time, and shone in the little window of the room. In the middle of the floor stood the mulatto, whom he had noticed in the office of the hotel that day. The light glinted on the blade of a long knife which he held in his hand, and he had evidently been on the point of plunging it into Ted's breast when he had been arrested by something surprising. Now his face was blanched white in the moonlight, his eyes were rolling and had a look of indescribable horror in them. All over the floor were the forms of the rattlesnakes, the little sidewinders, who had broken from their bag, which now lay on the floor. The mulatto had evidently dislodged it from the nail on which it hung near the door when he entered the room, and now they were whirring all about the fellow, their tails rattling incessantly, and their pointed heads swaying to and fro as they moved about the floor. The mulatto had entered the room with the intention of killing Ted and robbing him, and now it looked as though he were to meet death himself, and a much more horrible death than the one he had planned for his victim.

Ted's quick eye took in the situation at a glance. Before the thief had time to move or stir the young rough rider was up on one elbow, revolver in hand. He spoke to the fellow quietly, but loud enough to be heard above the incessant buzz of the sidewinders.

"If I were you," he said, "I don't think that I would move around very much."

The negro gasped and moved his lips, but he was so terrified that he was actually speechless.

"Just stay right where you are," said Ted; "there's a snake ready to strike right behind you. Stand still now, for I'm going to fire between your knees." Ted's revolver went off and the negro felt his trousers twitch as the ball cut a hole through the cloth close to his leg. The rattler which had been coiled up directly behind him fell back, its head severed from its body.

The mulatto had turned a sickly white color, and it seemed as though through sheer fright he would tumble over on the floor. Ted's wonderful steadiness with the weapon terrified him almost as much as the snakes had terrified him. He expected the young rough rider to turn the weapon upon him next, and give him the fate he deserved. The room was flooded with moonlight now, so that everything was as plain as day, the coiling bodies of the snakes on the floor, the half re-

cumbent figure of the young rough rider on the bed, and the glint of his deadly weapon.

"Steady now," said Ted, without changing his position; "there's another snake at your left foot. Wait for the smoke to clear a little." Crack went the revolver of the young rough rider, and another snake whipped over with a broken back.

"Don't move," said Ted, sternly, "or you'll either be shot or bitten. Stand up where you are."

Twice more the weapon of the young rough rider cracked, and two more snakes were dead.

"Now," said Ted, "there's another snake behind you. I'm going to shoot between your legs again. Stand steady."

Another snake toppled over at the report of the revolver. The room was filled with choking powder smoke, and the noise of the shooting in the small compartment was deafening. But there was no rattle now sounding in the ears of the negro. The young rough rider had killed all five snakes that the bag had contained, and, incidentally, had given a more wonderful exhibition of shooting than the man who had come to murder him had ever seen before.

Ted's revolver was now raised in a steady hand and covered the breast of the mulatto. The young rough rider was still leaning on his elbow, not having changed his position once during the whole affair. There was a stern smile playing about his face, and his eyes were fixed in a disdainful and pitying expression on the face of the man who had planned to kill him.

Of course, the tremendous fusillade of shots had aroused the rest of the house, and at this moment the landlord and several roughly dressed men rushed into the room. One of them was a man whom Ted had seen before, and whom he knew as a United States marshal.

The young rough rider rose to his feet, still keeping his prisoner covered with his weapon.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" he said. "I am sorry that I have been forced to disturb the house with this uproar. These snakes broke loose, and I was forced to kill them for fear they might hurt somebody."

The crowd looked at the floor and at the headless bodies of the snakes, and gasped in astonishment.

"This negro here," continued Ted, nodding toward his prisoner, "came in here with the intention of robbing and murdering me. I'll turn him over to Marshal Williams over there. Have you a pair of handcuffs with you, marshal?"

A moment later the handcuffs clicked around the wrists of the frightened mulatto.

"Now, gentlemen," said Ted, "I'm rather tired and would like to sleep. This room is a little littered up at present. I would like another."

"Ye'll hev ther best in ther house," said the landlord, stepping forward. And Ted had it, too. When he first arrived there the hotel man had treated him with scant courtesy, but now he could not do too much for him, and when the four rough riders rode out of Bitter Creek the following day they were sent off by a cheer in which the whole population joined.

"Well," said Ted, "we saved that medicine man's life, but he did us a good turn, too. Those rattlers saved my life all right by waking me with their buzzing."

"Winnenap didn't know that would happen when he gave you them, though," said Kit. "I dunno," said the superstitious Bud, "them medicine men hev shore a lot of knowledge."

THE END.

Next Week's Issue (No. 21) Will Contain

TED STRONG'S STEADINESS;

OR,

The Cattle Rustlers of Ceriso.

A Plot Against the Young Rough Riders.

The Little Town of Ceriso—A Balky Horse—Hank Lumpkin Meets a Boy in Khaki and Wrestles With Him—His Father Interferes. The Young Rough Riders Warned to Leave Town—Threatened With Jail—Ted Does Some Talking and Makes a New Friend—A Chance Meeting at the Hotel—Earl Rossiter Once More—A Conversation Between Rossiter and Tuttle—They Make Friends With the Marshal—A Pretty Girl—Tuttle Attempts to Flirt—Ted Strong Interferes—Rossiter Vows Vengeance—A Plot to Land Ted Strong in Jail—Ted's Interview With a Strange Girl and What it Led To—The Cattle Rustlers—The Fight at the Ceriso.

READ THIS, BOYS. IT'S GREAT!

THE ROCKSPUR RIVALS*

By BURT L. STANDISH.

THE following pages represent the fourth installment of this author's great serial story. It may be truthfully said that it would be impossible for anyone to find a tale that is more interesting or up-to-date. It is the kind of story that boys are always looking for, but rarely find outside of the lines published by Street & Smith.

Begin this great story right now. The synopsis will give you a good idea of the events that transpired in the previous installments, but if you desire to read them in detail, get the libraries mentioned in the footnote at the bottom of this page, in which the preceding chapters appeared.

Remember, we have not reduced the size of YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS to give you this installment. It is given entirely free to our readers in addition to a ROUGH RIDER story of usual length.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Through accident Rob Linton finds himself defeated in the first skating race of the season on Lake Glenwood. And to add to his dejection the girls of Rockspur were witnesses of his failure, particularly Dora Deland, who smiles upon his successful rival, Sterndale. Rob declares that he has still another card to play on the morrow, when Sterndale is to bring his fast ice-boat upon the frozen lake. A golden opportunity to have a nice, quiet skate with Dora is seized by young Linton; but they have the misfortune to break through the treacherous ice. Rob manages to sustain his frightened companion until assistance reaches them, but is almost exhausted when Sterndale, who has been beaten in the race to the rescue by John Smith, Rockspur's crack baseball pitcher, arrives, and both are dragged upon firmer ice. That night John Smith and Rob take their new ice-yacht, called the *Mystery*, over to the lake, and great surprise is manifested on the morning of the ice carnival to find that Sterndale's boat, *Dora*, has a rival. Rob takes Dora Deland for a sail, refusing John's assistance, with the result that a sudden jibe knocks the fool skipper overboard, and it is only owing to John's ability as a fast skater that the girl and ice-yacht are saved from a terrible catastrophe. Of course Rob feels very much cast down at his hard luck, but resists the tempter in the shape of one Leon Bentley, an evil-minded lad and a cigarette fiend, who hints that there may be clever ways of gaining an advantage over his rival, Sterndale. Mr. Renwood, as master of ceremonies, offers prizes for those who compete in the various sports, and Rob eagerly challenges Sterndale to a race with the rival ice-yachts. This race Rob finally wins through questionable methods of jockeying, and he is astonished that no shouts of applause greet his crossing the line ahead. Even Dora blames him for his sharp practices and unsportsman-like spirit. Then the various prizes are contested for, and finally there is a long skating race which Sterndale wins from Rob by a narrow margin. The latter drops in on John Smith that night, and influences the quiet lad to renew his pledge of friendship, for he feels as if the whole community had somehow come to look upon him as a vain boaster; which brings us to

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE BORDER LINE.

Rob was relieved by the outcome of this interview, which he had dreaded, despite the fact that since their friendly relations began Smith had seemed willing to accept him as a leader in most things. He knew John could be aroused to resentment, and he had not forgotten the fight behind the academy, when, goaded to despair by Linton's taunts, the tall lad proved to be a perfect terror, finishing by stretching the village bully senseless on the ground.

That fight ended Rob's days of bullying, and made him regard Smith with respect, although it was not what he needed to show him the full depths of his selfishness and disregard for the feelings of others. He had received his first merited lesson in a physical punishment; his next was to come from mental chastisement. Already in a vague way he was feeling the first touches of this.

A selfish lad cannot realize that by his selfishness he is robbing himself of one-half the pleasures he might enjoy through generosity and a desire to share with others; and unless, before his habits are fully formed, he receives a lesson that opens his eyes to the mistake he is making, he is pretty sure to develop into a close-fisted, hard-hearted, unsympathetic and unfeeling man, who will be shunned and disliked by his neighbors and all who know him.

There was a great contrast between Rob Linton and John Smith, and it seemed remarkable that two such fellows, having once been enemies, could become friends. Nor could this have been possible but for the fact that John was sympathetic, forgiving and generous to an unusual degree.

Twice during that eventful Saturday had Linton exhibited the full extent of his selfishness and disregard for one whom he called a friend, first by failing to acknowledge John as joint owner in the ice boat and by not pro-

*First installment, *Tip Top*, No. 435; second, *Buffalo Bill*, No. 171; third, *Nick Carter*, No. 400.

claiming him the builder of her, and next by pledging him to keep out of the skating race, so that Rob might have, as he fancied, a better chance to win the watch and triumph over Sterndale.

It must be set down to Linton's credit that he felt a slight sensation of shame and regret over these things, which proved that his selfish nature might be awakened to a knowledge of its errors.

Having shaken hands, the boys again sat down and talked matters over, but Rob was still uneasy until he finally whispered, with a cautious look toward the passageway that led to the kitchen door:

"I say, John, can't you sneak your skates out and go over to the lake with me? This is a great morning for skating, and we can't afford to lose any of it. Perhaps it will snow and spoil the skating in a day or two."

The other lad shook his head. "I can't do a thing like that on Sunday," he declared.

"Oh, come on!" urged Rob. "I've got my skates hidden out by the side of the road, for I didn't want our folks to see 'em. You can button yours under your coat. Just tell your mother first that we're going over to the lake to see if the *Mystery* is all right."

"My mother trusts me."

"That's all the better; she won't suspect anything. You can stay on the ice an hour or so."

"I've promised her I will not skate Sundays."

"Well, I've given father the same promise. He'd have a tantrum if he knew I went skating to-day, but I don't propose to let him know it. Come on."

But, besides remaining unshaken, John remonstrated with his companion, urging him not to go skating that day.

"Oh, what's the use!" Rob exclaimed. "I just can't keep off the ice! If you can, you're different from me, that's all."

He saw, however, that it was useless to urge John, so he left the shed, found the skates where he had hidden them in a bunch of dead grass beside the road, tucked them under his coat, and hastened away toward the lake.

"John's a good fellow," he thought, as he left the road and cut across the fields, "but he's just a little too slow and too good for me. He always has to keep every promise he makes his mother, and it seems that she's making him promise not to do anything a chap might want to do."

Then he happened to remember that, on one occasion, at least, John had, by fighting with him, broken a promise to his mother, and he had not proved to be very "slow."

Having crossed the railroad, Rob went down into a grove of trees on the shore of the lake. Dead leaves lay thick and frosty beneath his feet as he made his own path through the grove to the lake, where he sat down at the edge of the ice to clamp on his skates.

"I'll hurry up to get away from this part of the lake," he muttered, "so no one will see me."

At that moment, not thirty feet away, another boy rose up into view from behind a bowlder, where he had been fastening on his skates.

"Hello, Lint!" familiarly called Leon Bentley, for the other boy was the rascal of the village. "So you thought you'd have a little whirl this morning, did you? But I don't believe Deacon Linton knows a thing about it. You'll catch it, too, if he finds out."

Rob was not pleased by the presence of Bentley, and his face betrayed this plainly enough, for, chuckling in his unpleasant way, the scapegrace added:

"You've got an awful scowl on. Must have got out of bed wrong this morning. Or, maybe, you ain't got over that race yesterday."

"You're always around where you're not wanted," growled Rob.

"Thanks," snickered Leon. "But it don't strike me you're very grateful for what I tried to do for you yesterday."

"What you tried to do for me?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, what did you try to do?" demanded Rob, twisting up the clamp on his left skate so it would grasp the sole of his shoe tighter.

"Why, I tried to help you win the race, and I came pretty near doing it, too. I'm taking care to keep out of Sterndale's clutches, for I know he'd like to break my back."

Then Leon told how, seeing he was beaten, he had pretended to fall, and had skillfully tossed the stick along the ice so that Dick's skate struck upon it, which resulted in a heavy fall for Sterndale.

"When I saw him go down, I thought sure he was knocked out," chuckled Bentley; "but he jumped right up, gave me a killin' old look, and off he scooted after you. He didn't even wait for Murphy to catch up with him. As it was, it come mighty near doin' the trick, for he only beat you about a yard."

"Nobody asked you to do anything of the kind," muttered Rob, in an uncertain manner. "Besides, you might have been seen."

"Oh, I looked out for that," declared Leon, wagging his head. "We was right behind the island, and I knew nobody'd see me, so I could deny it in case he was beat and tried to lay it onto me. Even if they had seen me I'd sworn I slipped and it was an accident. You see, for all the way you've been treating me, I ain't forgot the old times, and I was ready to do anything to help you."

"Well, what do you want for it?" snapped Linton.

"Now, that's where you do me a great wrong," protested the foxy scoundrel, assuming an injured air. "I done it out of pure friendship—nothing else. You know all the fellers are down on me, and I feel like it would be good to have just one friend in town. I ain't no worse than lots of chaps. What I done was for a lark, more than anything else, and yet there are heaps of boys right in Rockspur who have done just as bad things, but turn up their noses at me now. I've been with some of 'em, too, to steal apples and grapes and things like that. They never were caught, and now they give me the marble heart. You know I ain't the worst feller in the world, Rob, for we used to be chums. I'd like somebody to say a friendly word to me now and then. Sometimes I feel like killing myself."

He snuffled and wiped his eyes, with a show of grief that was meant to touch his companion; but Rob sharply exclaimed:

"There, there; don't snivel! I don't know but you're right about other fellows being just as bad as you, but you want to remember that always the worst part of doing wrong is being found out. You were found out. I haven't forgotten we were friends, but it won't do for me to be too thick with you now. Still, we're both out here for a good skate, so let's not waste more time chinning. Come on."

They skated away together, Leon feeling satisfied over the result of his clever appeal.

The influence of John Smith upon Rob had been for the better, and Leon, as well as others, had been much surprised by the change in him; for now the village scapegrace was resolved to work with all the craft at his command to reinstate himself on the former friendly footing with the deacon's son, fancying it would be something greatly to his advantage.

Already wavering on the borderland of upright manliness, inclined to the wrong side by natural selfishness, Rob was in the proper mood to easily be led over the fatal line.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FALSEHOOD THAT DID NOT PAY.

Time passes swiftly to a boy on skates, and Rob remained on the lake much longer than he had intended, which compelled him to make all possible haste homeward after starting, in order to reach there before noon, when his father would return from church.

He knew the deacon had expected him to attend service that forenoon, and would demand to know why he had absented himself, and he spent his time on the homeward way inventing a plausible tale that would seem to bear the stamp of truth.

It was one of Deacon Linton's requirements that his son should attend religious service at least once on the Sabbath day, and he much preferred that it should be in the morning. Like many boys who feel that they are absolutely obliged to do a thing, the doing of it became obnoxious to Rob, and he was inclined to be seized with pretended headaches or illness of some sort on Sunday, in order to find an excuse to remain away from church.

This day, however, he had left home at an early hour, without letting anybody know he was going, and had not returned to accompany the others to church or to try to escape doing so through excuses, which, knowing his father as he did, made him feel sure there was serious trouble in store for him. But even then he did not suspect how serious it might be.

Slipping in by the back way, Rob hung up his skates, hastened to his room, changed his shoes for a pair of slippers and his heavy coat for a house-jacket, and was lying on the sofa in the library, apparently asleep before the crackling wood fire in the open grate, when his father, mother and little sister returned from morning service.

Although his eyes were closed, Rob knew his father looked into that room, and he shivered a bit on hearing the deacon say, in a cold, hard tone of voice:

"He is here. Take care of Sadie, Martha. I have something to say to him alone."

"Oh, I'm going to catch it!" thought the boy, quaking inwardly. "Well, I'll have to stand it, that's all."

A few minutes later he heard a firm, steady step, which he knew was that of his father, entering the room, but he remained perfectly motionless, pretending to breathe regularly and heavily.

"Robert!" said the deacon. When he spoke Rob's name in that manner it meant that a storm was about to break.

The boy did not stir.

"Robert!" repeated his father, and the tone was still more terrible.

"Eh?" said Rob, starting a bit and pretending to wake up. Then, having opened his eyes slightly, he seemed to see the tall form standing over him, and he rose to one elbow.

"Oh, it's you, father!" he said. "I was sound asleep."

"Sit up, sir!" commanded the deacon.

Rob did so promptly.

"Why were you not on hand to attend church this morning, young man?"

The deacon's bony face was hard and grim, and he pressed his thin lips together when he had given utterance to this question, his steady eyes seeming to bore the quaking lad through and through.

"Why—why, I wasn't here at church time," Rob stammered.

"I know you were not, but why weren't you, sir?"

"I did mean to be, but I—I——"

"You left the house directly after breakfast, without my permission, and you did not return. You know it is my wish and command that you attend church regularly every Sabbath, and yet you deliberately disobey me this day—deliberately, sir!"

"I didn't mean to," protested Rob. "I just ran over the river to see Smith. You know he and I built the ice boat together, father. I was so upset over losing that race yesterday that I came away from the lake without paying any attention to the boat, and I wanted to know if Smith had taken care of her. That was why I went over there this morning."

The thin, angular man continued to look at Rob in a manner that made the boy feel like squirming.

"Did that take you so long? You should not have done that without first asking me, but yet there was plenty of time for you to return and accompany us to church."

"We got to talking, father, and I didn't realize how the time was passing till it was awful late."

For a moment it seemed that the deacon's lips were pressed together more firmly than before, but they opened to ask another question:

"Did you remain at the Smith boy's house with him till after church began?"

A sudden fear assailed Rob. It was quite likely that John had been in church.

"No," he answered, "I think I left there before that."

"Where did you go?"

"To the lake," said Rob, faintly.

"What—what, sir? You went to the lake on Sunday? What for, young man?"

"To make sure our ice boat was all right. You know there were lots of skaters on the lake last evening, and Smith said he left so early that he didn't know—well, he wasn't sure the boat was all right. I just ran over to see."

"Indeed!" said his father, in an odd way. "Was that the only reason why you went to the lake?"

"Yes, sir."

"Be careful, Robert! Think again. You are sure?"

"I'm sure," persisted the boy, choking a little over the words and feeling that his face was very red.

"You didn't go to the lake to skate on Sunday?"

"No, sir."

"And you did not skate?"

"No, sir."

It was the deacon's turn to choke, the look of anger that came to his face making the boy quail. For some moments the man was quite unable to speak, and he could not control his voice when he did.

"Can it be," he said, "that my own son will deliberately look me in the eyes and tell me a falsehood? I can scarcely believe it! I never expected this!"

Rob's heart sunk, but still he would not confess. "Perhaps he doesn't know," he thought.

"What do you mean, father?" he cried, starting to his feet with a show of surprise, resentment and indignation.

"You know what I mean, sir—you know!" declared the deacon.

"I do not know!" asserted Rob, boldly. "I expected you would scold me for missing church, but I'm sure I never suspected you would accuse me of lying to you."

"And I'm sure I never anticipated that I would be compelled to do anything of the sort—never," said the man. "I have tried to bring you up as a boy should be brought up, and this is a heavy blow to me. That will do—don't speak. I don't want you to tell me any more falsehoods! You have told enough, sir—quite enough! You were seen going to the lake, young man, and you were seen skating on the lake."

"Who saw me?" faltered Rob, beginning to weaken, though he tried to brazen it out.

"Never mind who saw you. It was reported to me. I know where you keep your skates, and I went to see if they were there. You had taken them away. Don't!" he exclaimed, lifting one hand as the boy seemed trying to say something. "It's no use. The man who saw you knows you as well as I do, and he is a man of truth and veracity. But that is not the worst. You were in company with that young forger and criminal, Leon Bentley! You can't deny that!"

Rob knew, at last, that it was useless to deny anything, and now he stood with his eyes fastened on the floor, a feeling of mingled shame, anger and resentment seething in his heart. Inwardly he was crying, "Well, now you've found out, what are you going to do about it?"

"My boy," exclaimed the deacon, harshly, "my boy associating with a young scoundrel like that—a jail bird! My boy skating with him—on the holy Sabbath day! After all my teachings and all my prayers! Why, you'll end up in prison, sir—in prison!"

His emotion overcame him for a time, and still Rob remained silent, waiting for the storm to expend itself.

"I've done my best by you, young man," the stern old deacon said, "and now the time has come for me to draw the line and carry a strong hand—a strong and steady hand. Don't ever let me hear of you having anything more to do with young Bentley. Do you understand?"

Rob nodded.

"You must keep away from him—you must have nothing whatever to do with him. His influence is pernicious. Why, haven't you shown it to-day? You have

disobeyed me, you have desecrated the Sabbath, and you have lied to me! I have loved you, I've been proud of you, but if you continue to associate with that boy you'll surely bring your mother's gray hairs in sorrow to the grave. You must have nothing more to do with him. Understand that, and understand that I mean it, sir—I mean it!"

The man's anger and excitement had led him to say much more than he intended at the beginning, and, even now he longed to continue, but could not seem to find words to express himself. He tramped up and down the room, while Rob sank to a sitting position on the couch, resting an elbow on one knee, with his forehead on his hand, and stared silently at the floor.

At last his father paused again and stood looking down at him.

"That's all," he said, in a voice that was cold and repressed. "I have spoken so plainly that you cannot fail to understand. You will attend prayer-meeting this evening, and hereafter you will appear at services twice on the Sabbath on pain of my displeasure. I shall pray for you, my son—I shall pray the Lord to forgive you for your deception and your falsehoods."

He walked out of the room and left the humiliated boy sitting thus, his face partly hidden by the hand on which his forehead rested, his eyes bent upon the floor.

Perhaps five minutes had passed when he heard the familiar sound of crutches coming softly to his side and felt the gentle touch of a thin, white arm. Then a little arm stole round his neck and a childish, sympathetic voice whispered in his ear:

"Robbie, I'm awful sorry!"

He caught his crippled sister in his arms, kissed her and buried his hot face in her curls.

CHAPTER XXII.

ROB'S ANGER.

The following morning Rob did not appear at the lake to skate a short time with the other boys before school. He had reached the Baptist church on his way to the academy when he was surprised to meet John Smith. The ear-muffs of John's old cap were pulled down over his ears and he was wearing a pair of red mittens, knitted for him by his mother. He had no overcoat, and it struck Rob that he was rather thinly clad for such biting, cold weather; but there was a glow of health in John's thin cheeks, and the other lad fancied that his slender figure was beginning to develop and fill out.

John came up with a hurried step, his face seeming to wear something like a look of anxiety. He was carrying his books slung over his shoulder by a strap.

"Hello!" exclaimed Rob. "Where you going?"

"I was going to your house," John answered. "Just starting for school?"

"Yes. I thought likely you'd skate so late this morning that you'd only find time to rush straight from the lake to the academy. Been skating, haven't you?"

"I was over to the lake a little while."

"Lots of fellows there?"

"Quite a lot."

They walked together to the corner and turned up the street leading toward the academy.

"You didn't come out to skate this morning," said John, giving his companion a quick, sidelong look.

"No," Rob answered, "I didn't feel like it. To tell you the truth, old man, I didn't care to go over there and be guyed by the fellows, and I knew some of them would have lots to say."

"Then you haven't heard what's happened?" the tall lad questioned.

"No; what is it? Tell a fellow."

"Somebody's raised the dickens with Sterndale's ice boat—just smashed it all to pieces and cut up the sail."

"Great smoke!" cried Rob. "You don't say?" Then he saw that John's eyes were fastened upon him in a searching manner.

"That's right," nodded Smith. "Somebody did it last night. Dick is furious. He says he'll find out who did it and thrash the rascal within an inch of his life."

Despite himself, Rob could not prevent the faint laugh of satisfaction that rose involuntarily to his lips, but he checked it suddenly, though he said:

"Jingoes! but he must be hopping! I didn't mean to laugh, but I guess he can stand it better than anybody else in town. Wonder who did it?"

"That's what everybody has been saying. They all say it must be somebody who hates Dick and is ready to do any mean thing to hurt him."

"Well, who is there in town that——"

Rob stopped suddenly, struck by a thought that gave him a shock. Looking up, he saw that John was continuing that steady, penetrating stare at him, and his face burned instantly, for all of the frosty atmosphere.

"Look here!" he cried, catching hold of the tall boy's arm, "you don't mean to say they suspect me, do you? Speak out, Smith! Has any sneaking scoundrel dared insinuate that I would do such a thing? Tell me the truth!"

"I don't think anybody has said that much outright; but some of them said a fellow who would play the tricks you did in the ice-boat race Saturday would do almost anything."

It had cost John an effort to speak thus plainly, but he felt that it would be best to let Rob know the exact truth.

"Did they say that?" hoarsely exclaimed Linton. "Then it's sure they think I did it! Well, I didn't! I might do my best to beat Sterndale in some fashion in a contest, but I wouldn't stoop to do him or anybody else a mean turn like this. I'll fight any fellow who hints as much, too!"

"Keep cool!" advised John. "Fighting won't make anybody think differently."

"Don't tell me to keep cool! I guess you wouldn't be very cool if you were suspected of such a thing! But you—you don't think I did it, do you John?"

"No, I don't," said the tall boy, promptly and positively. "But I wanted to hear you deny it, that was all. I told them all that I didn't believe you would do it."

Rob was too angry toward those who suspected him to feel grateful just then that he had at least one friend whose confidence in him had not been shaken. He continued to storm till they came in sight of the academy, and then, in a repressed tone, he said:

"Wait! I just want to see the fellow who'll dare stand up before me and hint such a thing! I'll hit him, even if it's Sterndale himself!"

"Better not," advised John. "That won't change his mind. Better find a way to prove that he's mistaken."

"I won't bother to prove anything," declared the deacon's son, with a toss of his head. "But I'll make them prove anything they say against me; see if I don't!"

Sterndale had reached the academy ahead of them, and he was in the boys' coatroom, with at least a dozen youths around him, when John and Rob entered. The group had been talking earnestly, but sudden silence fell when they saw the comrades.

Rob's face had been flushed, but now it was pale. Without pausing to remove his cap or overcoat, he stepped toward Dick, the others falling back to let him advance.

"Look here, Sterndale," he said, without flinching before Dick's steady stare, "I hear something has happened to your old ice boat and that I'm suspected of knowing about it. Smith tells me some dunkheads said I must have done it, or hinted as much. Now, if there is anybody here who made that kind of talk, I dare him to repeat it. If you made it, Sterndale, I dare you!"

Rob was quivering with anger and excitement, and once more he had the aspect of the bully he had been before the time of his encounter with John Smith behind the academy. He meant what he said, too, his hands being clinched, ready to strike the instant anyone present opened his mouth in condemnation. John grasped his arm, seeking to quiet him; but Rob flung off his well-meaning friend, grating:

"Don't you interfere now! I'm going to settle this thing!"

A hush fell on the boys, who looked first at one and then at the other of the two lads who were facing each other. Sterndale did not seem at all disturbed, and somehow, in some inexplicable manner, he maintained that air of unconscious superiority which had won for him his recognized position as leader of the village lads.

"Do you deny, Linton, that you had anything to do with that dirty piece of work?" he asked, in a modulated tone.

"Of course I deny it! If you say so, you lie! Is that plain enough?"

"Quite," said Dick, with some color mounting to his face. "As I have not the least proof in regard to the identity of the perpetrator of the act, it would be hasty and injudicious for me to directly accuse anybody."

"Then you take back any charge you have made? You acknowledge I did not do it?"

"I have not said anything to take back, and, not knowing who did the trick, I do not acknowledge you did not do it. I do not like to think that you are quite as cheap and mean as that, but there are some who seem to fancy you must have had a hand in it."

"Who are they?" panted Rob. "Tell me one! If there is one here, let him step out and say so, like a man!"

But, remembering the days when Linton had seemed to prefer fighting to a feast, not one of them all ventured to open his mouth.

"Bah!" cried Rob, snapping his fingers in their faces. "You can croak behind my back, but you don't dare chirp to my face! The fellow who goes round talking about me where I can't hear him is a coward! I didn't touch your old ice boat, Sterndale, and I don't know who did! You may not believe me, but you don't dare say so."

"You're mistaken, Linton," said Dick, with a faint smile. "If I felt fully satisfied that you did it, I'd say so instantly."

"Then you'd have to fight me!"

"Very likely. In that case I should expect it, and it would give me great satisfaction."

"It might not give you much satisfaction. You think you're cock-of-the-walk, but you're not so much."

Rob was still throbbing for a fight, but again John grasped his arm, whispering in his ear:

"Look out! There's the professor! He's stopped outside the door, and he'll hear."

As the boys were not permitted to congregate in the coatroom, some of them sauntered out, and the group dissolved, many making a pretense of being busy hanging up coats and hats.

"You've had your say, Linton," said Sterndale, in a low voice, "but you haven't offered any proofs that you didn't do the job."

"And I'm not going to offer any such proofs," grated Rob. "I don't have to. You're the one who has to bring proofs, and you'd better keep still about me till you're able to do so."

Then he permitted Smith to pull him away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE JEWELER'S WINDOW.

There was another boy in Rockspur whom Dick suspected, and it was the village scapegrace, Leon Bentley. Leon had taken care to keep away from Sterndale since the skating race, which was a good thing for him, as Dick was anxious to lay hands on him.

Despite the bold manner in which Linton had confronted Sterndale, he had not succeeded in destroying the suspicions against himself. At intermission that forenoon, Walter Mayfair reported to the leader of the village lads that Linton and Bentley had been seen together skating on the lake the day before, and even hinted that, if Rob had not ruined the ice boat himself, he might have some knowledge of how it happened.

"That's right," said Danny Chatterton, who had overheard Walter's words. "Linton said he didn't do it, but he didn't sus-sus-say he didn't get somebody else to do it."

"Well, keep still, boys," advised Dick. "I'll find out some time who did the trick, and I'll make the sneak pay for it, too."

When the morning session closed, John Smith and Rob walked down the hill together.

"I rather think I shut Mr. Sterndale up," said Linton, with some satisfaction. "But I suppose he'll try to turn all the fellows against me now."

"I don't believe he'll do anything underhand," declared John.

"Well, the fellows seem to be getting down on me anyhow, just because I've dared have a little independence. You're the only real friend I have, John. You stood by me. Just wait till the time comes that you need a friend, and see if I don't remember it."

That afternoon Sterndale was displaying the watch which he had received as a prize for winning the skating race. It was a very pretty watch, with American movement.

"I've just taken it out for to-day," he said. "Mr. Burton got it in with some others only last week, and he hasn't had time to regulate it. I'm going to let him have it to regulate."

There were two lads who did not hasten to get a look at the watch. Rob Linton did not care to see it, for reasons which were easily understood, and, thinking it might have been his had he entered the race, John Smith did not press forward with the others.

Rob bore himself with an independent air, failing to show in the least how much he had been humiliated by recent events. Indeed, the fact that he had been unjustly suspected of a mean act gave him a feeling of virtuous indignation, made him forget that he had ever done anything to be condemned, and caused him to regard all who were not friendly to him with absolute contempt.

He kept away from Dora Deland, instinct and good judgment telling him it was the best thing to do at that time. Telling himself that some time before long she would be glad enough to again be friendly with him, he also felt that, after what he had done to save her from drowning, she was treating him in a very shabby manner.

That night after school he proceeded to the lake with his skates, and seemed to enjoy himself very much on the ice. There was not enough wind to sail the ice boat, so Smith likewise spent his time in skating. Together they looked at Sterndale's wrecked boat, which was ruined beyond repair, the irons being the only parts of it that could be used again. It had been smashed and chopped to pieces with an axe, and the sail had been ripped into ribbons with a sharp knife.

"To think anybody'd suspect me of doing a thing like that!" exclaimed Rob, tossing his head. "It's enough to make any decent fellow sore!"

"Do you suppose Bentley did it?" murmured John in his ear.

"Why should he?" asked Rob. "What good would it do him?"

"But it's just like him. You remember how he slashed the football suits and cut up the football last fall."

"That was because he knew somebody was going to be put in his place on the team. There was some cause for that."

"Well, Dick was captain of the eleven, and it's likely Leon still holds a grudge against him."

"I don't know whether he did it or not," said Rob, "and I don't care a rap. Come, let's skate. We haven't got much time, and it looks like snow to-morrow."

"It's strange how Smith hangs to him," said Don Scott, as the two lads skated away together. "Six months ago I wouldn't have dreamed of them being chums."

"Nobub-bub-body else," stuttered Chatterton. "Now they're a regular Dud-Dud-David and Ju-Jonathan."

John and Rob skated up the lake. When they came back they saw that the boys had formed two teams and were playing ice-hockey, Sterndale being captain on one side and Renwood on the other.

"They didn't ask you to play," said Rob. "That's because you are my friend, and they still think I'm a sneak. If you want to have fun with them, you'd better quit having so much to do with me."

"Have you forgotten," said John, soberly, "that we are pledged friends, bound to stand by each other through thick and thin."

"No, but——"

"Then don't talk to me about not having so much to do with you. What kind of a friend would I be if I didn't prove my friendship now?"

"You're all right, Smith!" exclaimed Rob, heartily. "I never knew before just the kind of a fellow you are."

Neither of them joined in the hockey game, but John found Agnes on the lake and skated with her a while.

Tuesday morning, while passing on his way to school, John saw Sterndale's watch hanging in the window of Mr. Burton, the village jeweler, whose store was in a side room off the post office. He might not have observed it but for a large card dangling beneath it, on which the jeweler had written in flourishing chirography the information that it was the prize watch presented to Richard Sterndale by Mr. Hosea Renwood.

John told Rob of this, and at noon they both came down to the little store and stopped before the window to get a good look at the watch.

"It isn't so much," said Rob, enviously.

"I think it's fine," declared John.

"Why, it's nothing but an old open-face watch."

"It isn't old; it's new and handsome."

"It looks cheap."

"Of course it is not a high-priced watch, but it must have cost fifteen dollars."

"I'd like to see the back of it," said Rob; but at that moment Mr. Burton came out and locked the door of his little store, stepping off briskly on his way to dinner.

"Well, we won't get a chance to see it to-day," laughed John.

"We might go round through the post office. You know there's a door that opens into a part of Mr. Burton's store that is shut off from the rest by an iron grating. Sometimes he leaves that door unlocked at noon, but nobody can go in without being seen by the postmaster or Ted Cobb, the clerk. We couldn't get near the watch, but we might see it through the grating."

As John hesitated, a footstep sounded at their side, and Leon Bentley joined them. He chuckled as he saw them peering through the window at the watch.

"Taking a look at the lost prize, eh?" he said, in an irritating way. "But what do you think of Sterndale for having it strung up there on exhibition? Wouldn't that give you a cramp!"

"I don't suppose he had it put up on exhibition," said John. "I heard him say he was going to leave it with Mr. Burton a short time to be regulated."

"Oh, fudge! That was a bluff. It's just a trick of his to put it on exhibition. He wanted to dangle it before your eyes to show you what you'd lost."

"Sterndale is looking for you," said Rob, suddenly. "Did you smash his ice boat?"

"I don't know anything about his old ice boat," retorted Leon. "Is it smashed?"

"Is it? It's ruined."

"Well, he don't want to tell anybody that I did it, for I'll make him prove it if he does," asserted Bentley, with pretended fierceness. "I'm minding my own business now, and I want people to let me alone. They needn't be accusing me of doing all the bad things that are done."

"I've got to go home," said John. "See you after dinner, Rob."

When he started away, Leon immediately joined him, saying:

"I'm going over to your house. Mother sent me to get your old lady's receipt for that baked Indian pudding she makes."

"I'll thank you not to speak of my mother in that manner!" flared John, his face flushing.

"Oh, I didn't mean anything," protested Leon. "I call my mother that; she don't mind it."

"You should be ashamed of it," said John, warmly.

Although the tall lad little relished the company of Bentley, he did not say so. Leon chattered away as they crossed the bridge, but John observed that he looked back several times. As they came to the end, John also looked backward, wondering what attracted Bentley's attention. Linton had vanished, and a somewhat seedy-looking stranger with a cane was sauntering slowly into the post office.

"Come on," said Leon. "I've got to hurry up."

When John's home was reached, however, Bentley's inclination to hurry seemingly had passed, for he continued to linger after Mrs. Smith had given him the recipe for which he asked.

"It must be your dinner time," said John's mother, meaningly. "Your mother'll be expecting ye home, Leon."

"Oh, she knows better than to expect me till I come," grinned the unwelcome caller. "Don't you worry about that. I'm in no rush. I guess I'll wait and walk back with John."

"Well, we're going to have dinner now, and you——"

"Thanks, Mrs. Smith; I ain't hungry," chuckled the impertinent fellow, winking at John.

"Very well," she said; "you may wait by the kitchen fire. It's warmer than in here. Take your chair right out." And, to John's surprise, she actually marched Bentley out of the dining room.

"My son," she warned, speaking guardedly, as they were eating dinner, "you must be careful not to be seen too much with that boy, for it will give you a bad name. He is a bad boy."

"Don't worry, mother," said John, reassuringly. "There is no danger."

Leon was still waiting when John finished eating, drew a pail of water for his mother, attended to some other little things about the house, and was ready to start for school again.

"I thought you were in an awful hurry," said the tall boy, as they started down the hill.

"Maybe I was in a hurry to get to your house," Bentley admitted. "Didn't know but you'd ask a feller to dinner, but your old lady—your mother, I mean—was dead on, and the way she hustled me out into the kitchen was a caution. And I heard her whispering something to you about me. I guess I ain't very popular in this old town, and I'm goin' to jump out of it in a hurry some day. When I come back I'll be rich, too, and I'll just make some of these stiffs who've been giving me the cold shoulder take off their bonnets to me, see if I don't."

Leon wagged his head, looking both injured and determined.

Somehow, John could not help thinking there was something more than Leon admitted in his singular haste to reach Smith's home and his change of manner after arriving there.

As they passed over the bridge, Bentley said:

"Let's have another look at Sterndale's watch. I wanted to win that for myself, and there was a time in the race that I thought I was goin' to do it."

When they came to the little jeweler's shop, however, to the surprise of John, the watch was no longer hanging in the window.

"Burton's doing the regulating now," grinned Leon. "Let's go in and ask him to show it to us."

"But he isn't in," said John.

"So he isn't!" exclaimed Bentley. "That's kind of funny. Guess Sterndale must have called for it and got it. It's likely he'll be sportin' it round up to school this afternoon. He likes to show off and rub it into you fellers he can beat."

John walked on without making a retort.

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